

Meeting The Needs Of New Yorkers

An Interview with Grace C. Bonilla, President and Chief Executive Officer, United Way of New York City

EDITORS' NOTE Grace Bonilla has a wealth of knowledge and experience in the nonprofit and public sectors. She joined United Way of New York City (UWNYC) as President and CEO in July 2022. Previously, she served as Senior Vice President for Latin America at Covenant House International (CHI) where her portfolio included services to homeless children in Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Before joining CHI, Bonilla worked in the social services space focused in New



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York City. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, Bonilla was appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio to serve as the first Executive Director of the Taskforce on Racial Equity and Inclusion, where she led a cross section of 80 city leaders and made over 100 recommendations, many of which are currently implemented. Bonilla was also appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio in February 2017 as Administrator of the Human Resources Administration (HRA). Bonilla served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of The Committee for Hispanic Children & Families, Inc. (CHCF). From 2004-2014, Bonilla worked for the Bloomberg Administration where she took on different leadership roles within HRA. She served as the Deputy Commissioner overseeing the Office of Community Affairs and Immigrant Services. Bonilla also served as Assistant Deputy Commissioner with the Office of Constituent Services. In 2009, she was Director of Legislation and Policy at the Office of Child Support Enforcement. Before becoming Director, Bonilla served as a Senior Legislative Analyst. In February 2019, Bonilla was accepted into The Annie E. Casey Foundation Children and Family Class 11 Fellowship. The Annie E. Casey Foundation hosts a biennial fellowship which helps to train a generation of thought leaders to advance the field of social welfare. Bonilla received a BA degree in political science from St. John's University, and a JD from Brooklyn Law School, where in 2015 she was awarded the Cesar Perales Community Advocate Award.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF United Way of New York City (unitedwaynyc.org) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping low-income New Yorkers make ends meet and lead economically mobile lives. Its mission is to help mobilize its communities to break down barriers

and build opportunities that improve the lives of low-income New Yorkers for the benefit of all. Working in the most underserved communities, United Way of New York City ensures that individuals and families are never one paycheck away from hunger or homelessness; that children can dare to dream and build a future for themselves; and that cross-sector partners can collaborate to provide the resources and infrastructure necessary to support community needs.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I got my start in the world of law, working as a paralegal at an international law firm before making the jump to go into the social service sector. After graduating law school, I joined New York City's Department of Social Services Human Resources Administration in 2004, and I've been fortunate to add meaningfully to our communities through the various positions I held at the organization. I also understand the nonprofit sector and its vital place in addressing the needs of people in crisis. I had the opportunity to serve as the Senior Vice President for Latin America at Covenant House International where I worked on programs that supported homeless children in Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua, tackling the root causes of homelessness: poverty, human trafficking, substance use, unstable political environments, and the consequences of children migrating among these countries and the U.S. I also served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of The Committee for Hispanic Children & Families, combining education and advocacy to expand opportunities for children and families and strengthen the voice of the Latine community.

In 2019, I was accepted into The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) Children and Family Class 11 Fellowship. The AECF hosts a biennial fellowship which helps to train a generation of thought leaders to advance the field of social welfare by boldly measuring the impact of various programs and our collective responsibility to influence systems change. AECF is dedicated to addressing the issue of children at risk – focusing on community building and strengthening families through its multiple annual grants and training initiatives.

When I think about all of my service-oriented work experience, joining United Way of New York City as President and CEO was the perfect next step. UWNYC sits at the intersection of many important programs and causes, whether it be health equity, education, food and benefits access, or opportunities for all New Yorkers to succeed. Supporting New Yorkers and driving equity is energizing and I am glad to be doing so as the President and CEO of UWNYC.

Will you provide an overview of the history of United Way of New York City?

United Way of New York City has deep roots in our community, working to empower our most vulnerable neighbors – and has been doing so since its inception in 1938. The Great Depression was nearing the end, a glimmer of hope was in the air, but so many were struggling. It was then that Rockefeller rallied the titans of industry – Vanderbilt, Morgan, and Carnegie – to come together and change what it meant to be a New Yorker. They founded an organization that would collect funds and distribute them to local charities, coordinate relief efforts, refer people to agencies and programs who could support them, and provide emergency assistance while individuals and families worked to regain stability after such economic devastation. And so began the organization that today we know as United Way of New York City.

Today, our organization is still creating solutions for our city's toughest challenges, but in a more innovative, efficient, and effective way. Over the past 86 years, we've grown from being a fundraising entity to becoming a leader in collaboration, capacity building, and systems change. And while funding is critical to fuel our mission, we measure success in the lives we impact.

How do you describe United Way of New York City's culture and values?

At United Way of New York City, we are committed to equity, and we believe in empowering all New Yorkers with the tools and resources needed to succeed. To do that, we prioritize an inclusive workplace that promotes innovation, creativity, and a passion to solve our city's complex challenges. For example, our executive leadership team is a diverse group of smart people with the lived experience to understand the communities we serve and drive lasting, systemic changes for

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New Yorkers. At UWNYC, we come together to meet the needs of New Yorkers.

Will you highlight United Way of New York City’s work and programs?

At United Way of New York City, our focus areas are education equity, food and benefits access, justice and opportunity, and health equity. In our True Cost of Living Report, we found that 50 percent of New Yorkers are struggling to make ends meet. We have a responsibility to address this, and we strive to empower all New Yorkers with the resources needed to thrive. We do that by strengthening how our trusted partner community-based organizations keep the city afloat. From a tactical perspective, our work helps ensure that children get a quality education and that people have dignified access to nutritious food, health resources and preventive care, and the tools and opportunities to succeed.

Will you highlight the importance of partnerships to United Way of New York City’s efforts?

It is really important to recognize that no one organization, person or agency can do this important work alone. With a city as large as New York, we need support from every sector – private, public, and government. The power of coalition building, storytelling, aligned contributions, and collective impact are the secret to our success. We ensure that our most trusted partners have a seat at the table, that they are well resourced for sustainability, and that the concerns of our corporate partners and everyday New Yorkers are treated with equal importance. There is no better feeling than to run into a member of the community who tells me that United Way of New York City gave them their first grant to start an organization or to talk to a member of one of our corporations who tells us how life changing it was when we gave them an opportunity to give back at one of our schools or one of our pantries. It is the trust that people place in us to be a part of the fabric of the city and an agent of change that motivates me to continue doing this work. Anyone can be a donor, an advocate, or a volunteer to help support our mission.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of United Way of New York City’s initiatives?

Metrics tell a big part of the story. They certainly are important to measure how well we are doing to meet our basic responsibility to the constituents we are contracted to serve. What I love about our approach to metrics is that we are also asking who is better off because of our intervention? What questions should we ask to ensure that the intervention we are using with one population is working with another? We believe that part of equity is targeted universalism and meeting communities where they are. While we can count the pounds of food or the number of books we

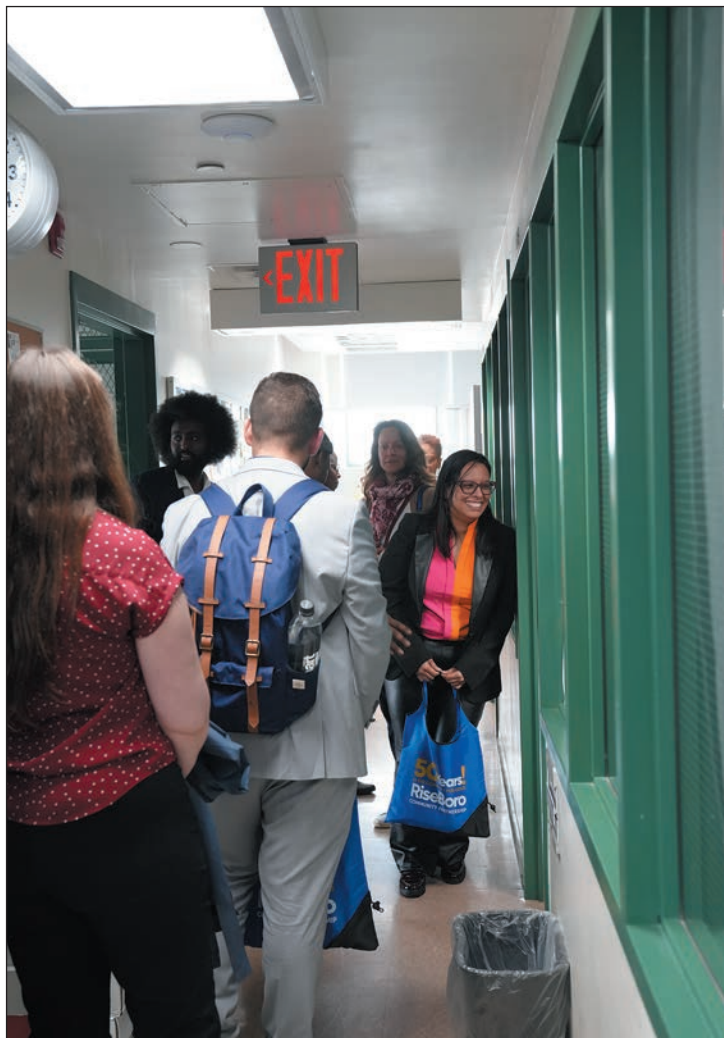
have distributed, we also care about whether these interventions were a step forward towards upward mobility, physical and mental health, and educational attainment. Our community violence intervention program is a good example of how we push systems to look beyond initial services. For example, 97 percent of participants who complete our violence intervention program do not have a violent felony rearrest. We are not satisfied with saying we provided mental health services; we look for outcomes that can lead to systems change. We also understand that not every organization and community can measure some of the amazing culturally competent programs that also work in our very diverse communities and that is

why we meet our community-based organizations where they are – so the metrics they apply can also tell their story. We can’t set big goals until we have an understanding of the impact of our work. Just because something sounds good or feels like the right course of action doesn’t mean we are getting results, especially when we scale it up to something that is meant to impact people’s lives. Some of our metrics include partnering with organizations to distribute more than 14 million pounds of food to families, provide more than 230,000 books to students, expand preventative healthcare access for over 100,000 New Yorkers, and launch a community violence intervention program.

What attracted you to nonprofit work and what makes the work so special for you?

Born and raised in Queens, I witnessed firsthand the pressing needs in our communities. Nonprofits like UWNYC operate with a focused mission, providing vital support where it’s needed most. I’ve always been amazed at how effective UWNYC is at working with stakeholders and trusted community-based organizations to back programs achieving real results and address the diversity of ideas aligned towards contribution.

New York City is a city of promise – it’s why my parents moved here from Ecuador in the first place. Organizations like UWNYC are critical to driving that promise because they are able to bring all of these community organizations together to unite behind one goal – making this city a place where everyone can thrive. ●



In 2024, Grace Bonilla and the United Way of New York City team visited RiseBoro, one of the organization’s community partners that empowers system-impacted youth through the Functional Family Therapy-Adult program