

Community-Driven Empowerment

An Interview with Angela F. Williams, President and Chief Executive Officer, United Way Worldwide

EDITORS' NOTE Angela Williams is President and Chief Executive Officer of United Way Worldwide (UWW). With more than 30 years of leadership experience in the nonprofit and corporate sectors, Williams brings her innovative vision and a long history of purpose-driven work to her role at United Way Worldwide. Before joining United Way, Williams was President and CEO of Easterseals, the nation's leading nonprofit provider of life-changing disability services. She also served on active duty in the U.S. Air Force Judge Advocate General's Corps for more than six years; led as an Executive Vice President, General Counsel, and Chief Administration Officer at YMCA of the USA; served as an inter-faith liaison for the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund; was special counsel on criminal law for Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the Senate Judiciary Committee staff; served as a prosecutor on the DOJ Civil Rights Division's National Church Arson Task Force; and was an Assistant U.S. Attorney. Recognized for innovative leadership, Williams was included in the 2022 NonProfit Times' Power and Influence Top 50, Forbes' 2021 List of Women Over 50 Creating Social Change at Scale, Inside Philanthropy's List of the 50 Most Powerful Women in U.S. Philanthropy, and Virginia Business' Virginia 500 Power List of Prominent Leaders for Nonprofits/Philanthropy. She also received a 2021 CEO Today Healthcare Award. Williams earned a bachelor's degree in American Government from the University of Virginia, a juris doctor from the University of Texas School of Law, and a Master of Divinity cum laude from the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University.



Angela F. Williams

With a presence in 36 countries and territories, the organization's network has the deep knowledge, perspectives, relationships, and resources to drive change at a global level. United Way believes that the power of people, united through a common purpose, can accomplish anything.

Will you share the key milestones of your career journey and what led you to your role as President and CEO of United Way Worldwide?

My family, culture, and early life culminated into my role at United Way and really have influenced my entire career. Growing up as the child of civil rights activists, I learned early on the power of community, the importance of resilience, and the impact one can make by standing up for justice. Those formative experiences not only instilled in me a sense of purpose, but also taught me the value of perseverance. The fight for civil rights was never easy – it demanded unwavering determination, courage in the face of resistance, and the belief that progress, no matter how slow,

was worth pursuing. That lesson in perseverance has been a guiding force throughout my life and career.

After earning my law degree from the University of Texas, I began my career as an Assistant United States Attorney. My time in government gave me exposure to how institutions can make a difference, and fueled my passion for creating systemic change. These experiences inspired me to take on roles with community-based organizations like the YMCA and Easterseals, where I focused on bridging gaps in education, health, and equal opportunity. Each of these roles reinforced my belief that by mobilizing resources, building partnerships, and activating communities, we can empower individuals to achieve lasting, positive change.

When I was invited to lead United Way Worldwide, I felt a profound alignment between my personal journey and the historic organization's mission. As President and CEO, I feel honored to lead a nonprofit that unites communities in transformative ways and brings people together to create opportunity, resilience, and hope for future generations.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF United Way (unitedway.org) seeks to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities around the world to advance the common good. The organization is a community action network with deep local roots in tens of thousands of communities around the world. It mobilizes neighbors, donors, volunteers, and partners from all backgrounds to unite towards a common goal: helping every person in every community thrive. United Way's approach is focused on local investment and making life better for everyone in the communities in which it works.



Angela Williams visits FEMA in Washington, DC during Hurricane Helene response and recovery

How would you articulate the mission of United Way Worldwide, and how does it distinguish itself from other nonprofit organizations?

United Way Worldwide's mission is straightforward: United Way seeks to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities around the world to advance the common good. What truly sets United Way apart is our model of community-driven empowerment, combined with a global infrastructure so we can scale impact while remaining attuned to the needs of individual communities. Each United Way tailors their strategies to local needs and cultural nuances, while collectively benefiting from shared resources, expertise, and vision.

We recognize that meaningful change requires a holistic approach. That is why United Way uniquely addresses interconnected challenges, from promoting healthy communities and youth opportunities to focusing on financial security and community resiliency. By fostering collaboration across public, private, and nonprofit sectors, we create a network effect in which each local United Way has the autonomy to identify and respond to its community's unique challenges while contributing to broader global goals. We can be connective, responsive, and scalable because of our innovative, agile structure.

How do you ensure that United Way Worldwide remains attuned to the unique needs and cultures of each community it serves, and how do you empower these communities to drive their own progress and resilience?

Each community we support has its own identity, challenges, and strengths, and we approach every challenge by actively listening and responding to each community's needs. United Way Worldwide works to support and amplify these efforts, ensuring each chapter has the resources it needs to conquer adversity, make connections to prepare for potential challenges, and collaborate to face crisis scenarios armed with best practices.

We prioritize partnerships with local organizations, faith leaders, and advocates who deeply understand the local networks, respect the culture and have earned the community's trust. Local United Ways are often engaged in initiatives that foster economic stability, expand access to health, enhance educational opportunities, and more – yet each local program is uniquely tailored to reflect the community's culture and goals.

By aligning our global resources with local expertise, we build a resilient network that empowers communities so they can shape their own futures, equipping people with the tools they need to create brighter outcomes on their own terms. Our reach across tens of thousands of communities means we can share innovations and scale impact to improve lives globally.

Partnerships and collaboration are at the heart of United Way Worldwide's success. How do you cultivate meaningful, long-term relationships with corporate, government, and community partners to

drive impactful change, and will you share an example of a partnership that was transformative for a community?

United Way partners with organizations that not only contribute financial or material resources, but those who share our purpose and commitment. By aligning around common values, clear objectives, and mutual respect, we form relationships that can grow and adapt alongside the evolving needs of the communities we serve, ensuring that our support is relevant, responsive, and rooted in real impact.

One transformative example is our Power Forward partnership, an alliance that united corporate, government, and community stakeholders to tackle a vital need: affordable, sustainable housing in low-income and disadvantaged communities. With a \$2 billion investment from the Environmental Protection Agency's National Clean Investment Fund, Power Forward provides capital to support residential decarbonization, prioritizing communities most impacted by climate change and economic instability. United Way Worldwide's role is to connect communities with these resources through a coordinated outreach strategy and by strengthening 211 services, which links individuals to essential services and supports. Power Forward is successful because of its collaborative foundation. Each partner brings their individual strengths, from funding to local insights, which fosters a partnership that is impactful, resilient, and evolving. By working side-by-side with community advocates and leaders who understand the needs on the ground, we develop solutions that are both relevant and empowering, ultimately laying the groundwork for stronger communities that will thrive long after our initial involvement.

United Way has a long history of community impact, but today's world faces increasingly complex and interconnected challenges. How has the organization's strategy evolved to address these modern issues, and how do you ensure that United Way remains adaptable in an ever-changing landscape?

In an age of rapid transformation, we have embraced a community-centered, collaborative approach that addresses the interconnected challenges of health, education, and economic stability. We recognize that these issues are intertwined, and meaningful progress requires us to be adaptable, flexible, and most importantly, responsive to the voices of those we serve. Global organizations and institutions like United Way have long used a framework known as VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous – to understand the world. Yet, as challenges evolve, we need a new lens. That is why I have imbued my leadership and vision at United Way with the BANI framework – Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible. The BANI framework builds upon VUCA by offering more accurate ways to characterize the unpredictable nature of our contemporary global landscape.

Our response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton is a powerful example of this approach

in action. When the storms hit, our local chapters quickly mobilized to provide immediate relief – distributing food, offering safe shelter, and coordinating medical care. But we also knew that true recovery required more than immediate aid; it meant helping communities regain stability and hope. We worked hand-in-hand with local organizations and government partners to support long-term recovery efforts, including small business relief, mental health services, and educational support for displaced students. By being flexible, addressing uncertainty with empathy, encouraging small acts with massive effect, and breaking down complex issues into digestible problems, we continue to address affected communities' most critical needs now and are anticipating the systems and resources they will need long into the future.

What do you believe are the most essential qualities of effective leadership, especially in a mission-driven organization like United Way Worldwide, and how do you adapt your management style to inspire, motivate, and guide such a diverse and global team, particularly when each local chapter has its own leadership and organizational structure?

To effectively scale mission-driven organizations like United Way Worldwide, we must lead in ways that leverage our connectivity, responsiveness, and scalability. These characteristics perfectly capture what I believe are United Way's defining strengths. United Way presidents frequently tap into our wide-ranging networks and they understand the strengths of their colleagues and tap into them. We have a strong culture that fosters collaboration. With over 1,100 local United Ways in 36 countries, each of which runs its own set of "experiments" through the programs they support, we can quickly learn which tactics work and should be replicated and tailored to respond to similar crises. Our leaders also know how to be flexible in order to be responsive to challenges globally. They can quickly assess the issue at hand and activate the necessary institutional resources to support affected communities.

What advice would you give to young professionals entering the workforce, particularly those interested in careers in nonprofit or social impact work?

For young professionals entering the nonprofit space, my advice to you is to approach your work with an open mind and a collaborative spirit. Every generation brings new ways to revolutionize the world, and today's is defined by technology, artificial intelligence, and social media. Yet the core of meaningful change remains collaboration. More nonprofit organizations now approach their work through a partnership lens – recognizing that combining diverse talents and perspectives is essential for sustainable impact.

Change isn't something you can achieve alone. It requires humility, purpose, and a willingness to work with and learn from others. Embrace each experience as an opportunity to grow and recognize that the people and communities you serve are your greatest teachers. ●