An Interview with Sheena Wright,
President and Chief Executive Officer, United Way of New York City

Sixty-five percent of our revenue comes from the corporate sector, but not just from a boutique group: it's from retail, corporations, law firms, etc., and it ranges from the CEO to the cashier at Macy's. So the whole corporate community answers the call.

The second sector we are deeply engaged with is direct service organizations in every borough in the city. We know what programs are good and where to make bets that will pay off, and we are trusted by the nonprofit community.

The third sector is the public sector, where you get the broad-scale systemic change. We have a strong relationship with the public sector because we have been partners and grantees, and we have helped drive large-scale change based on pilot innovative initiatives in partnership with the corporate sector.

We work to leverage those three disparate groups to create significant impact.

Has the mission evolved through the years?

The mission has been refined in response to market demands. United Way was initially a community chest, so it collected a lot of resources, and its mission was advancing the common good. It was great, but we didn’t know how to measure if we were moving the needle.

Ten years ago, we shifted from simply being a community chest to a collective impact organization that can demonstrate that it has moved the needle in education, financial strength and stability, and health. We make strategic investments where we’re bringing together the players that influence a positive outcome in those areas.

Our mission continues to be about good works and societal improvements, but it has been more defined and the approach has changed significantly.

You touched on education. Why hasn’t more impact been made to improve and re-form the system?

There has been a lot of dialogue; some helpful and some not. Because we’re still having these conversations in silos, we’re missing the proper collaboration.

Building a strong educational system is critical in making sure we produce a well-skilled workforce, but the corporate sector has not been at the table in the way it should. It needs to help determine the competencies and skills that are needed in the workforce and that have to be included in curriculums. Today, there is still a sense that the corporate sector will have to play catch-up in retraining and reeducating those who come out of the education system.

Macy’s is one of our top corporate sponsors and Terry Lundgren (Chairman, Macy’s) was formerly on our board. He said the amount of time and money he has to spend pre-training new recruits before he actually trains them to do their job is enormous. He would obviously like to reduce that spend but he cannot figure out how to move the Department of Education (DOE). Workforce development organizations and nonprofits are trying to train people but they don’t have the perspective of the corporate CEOs to help them understand what training they need to provide.

We need to have one conversation with all those involved so we can capitalize on what everyone brings to the table. There are pockets of success, but the three key sectors aren’t coming together to collectively have one goal to strive towards.

What is the primary focus for United Way of New York in terms of health?

Health care access is a huge issue. We predominantly focus on low-income communities across the city, and address that 50 percent of New Yorkers who are at or near the poverty level. Since the last recession, 31 percent of Americans have experienced some form of poverty. Health care expenses are huge and can really drive people over the edge.

Prevention is also important. A lot of what plagues low-income New Yorkers is asthma and diet-related diseases, like diabetes. We work to come up with better solutions around access and service delivery, and to understand how these issues impact educational outcomes, and people’s ability to work steadily and not lose their jobs.

How are you attempting to address the issues of financial strength and stability?

We’re in the process of investing in a self-sufficiency index that addresses how much it actually costs to live in areas of New York by pricing out housing, child care, groceries, and other basic expenses. We will then be able to link that to what kind of jobs will drive the income necessary to live there. It will also allow us to address other necessary support, like affordable housing.