Ed Rivera, President and Chief Executive Officer and Jennifer Mastripolito, Chief Development Officer
United Way of Central New Mexico

Having served in numerous senior and chief executive posts, Ed Rivera has more than forty years of leadership and management experience in the nonprofit community. In 2008, Ed joined United Way of Central New Mexico (UWCNM) as President and CEO. Since Rivera’s arrival, the UWCNM completed a community-based strategic planning process that included numerous town hall meetings. UWCNM also announced the highest amount raised in its over seventy-five year history ($29,029,000). In conjunction with other United Ways in the State of New Mexico, he has assisted in the facilitation and development of a new statewide association to benefit the United Ways of New Mexico. Previously, Rivera spent ten years at Kittleman and Associates, a leader in nonprofit leadership resources. During this period, he consulted with leading non-profit organizations and associations throughout the United States.

Jennifer Mastripolito has been the Chief Development Officer for United Way of Central New Mexico since July 2010. In this key leadership position, she has worked to combine fundraising with community building efforts. Mastripolito, who has been at UWCNM since 2004, has served in several capacities at United Way that have included both fundraising and fund distribution leadership roles. Mastripolito’s unique set of skills and experience has played a major role in UWCNM’s implementation of the 2010 Strategic Plan, focused on the integration of raising and distributing funds in more focused and measurable ways. Mastripolito has been part of the leadership team that developed the genesis of the Education Support Initiative through community forums and in working with existing education-related collaborations and coalitions in central New Mexico.

Q: Tell us about your personal and professional career path that led you to this work. What makes you passionate about this work for kids, families and the community?

Rivera: I grew up in the Hispanic culture in this part of the county. I saw the struggle first hand, in a working class family, and many of those same conditions and challenges still exist today. The way to make a difference today is to do the kind of work we are doing.

I have worked in the nonprofit sector for a very long time, approximately 25 years with United Ways around the United States [Rivera has worked at United Ways in Chicago, Corpus Christi, San Jose and Boulder], and 15 years in related entities within the non-profit sector. I have always wanted to do work that makes a difference and I’ve been fortunate to find fulfilling opportunities in my career. Working in a community, we get to work with great networks, to bring resources and ideas to bear to better serve children and families. What excites me about the work we are about to do is that you not only get the chance to organize and mobilize, but to measure progress over a period of time.

Q: Can you describe the role you see United Way playing in building civic infrastructure?

Rivera: If you are in listening and conversation mode, you are in a strategy mode. If you are looking at the big picture, it is easier to make decisions with the board about important strategies. In our strategic plan, and as part of our community conversation, we determined [we] needed more data around educational support. So we worked with the University of New Mexico to give us data from the community support side. That has helped us have more meaningful conversations to determine future strategies.
Q: What do you see as United Way’s role in mobilizing the community at-large to support the partnership’s outcomes and strategies?

Rivera: Two things: First is to keep the conversation and direction moving. The right kind of community leadership needed to be signed up and United Way played a big role in mobilizing a Vision Council that brought together cross-sector folks — education, government, business, and other community organizations. We had the cross-functional leadership to bring key sectors together.

The second is being able to put together an accountability structure with adaptable, flexible and open opportunities to involve most segments of the community. We helped set that table and have great communication around that. So it is the ability to recruit and support a Vision Council and then allow the Vision Council to arrive at its own response to many ideas that are proposed to them. Candidly, I’ve been pleasantly surprised by their high rates of attendance and responses to certain situations, but that has been very positive because it reflects their commitment and willingness to engage in this work.

Mastripolito: I have a vivid memory of talking with Ed about ensuring there was co-leadership at the Vision Council — that we needed an educator and a business leader. We wanted to avoid finger pointing and we knew that if it was going to work, we needed a wide variety of people and the effort needed to be co-led by business and education.

Q: How have you achieved a balance between the needs of the partnership and of United Way?

Rivera: It is always a journey and always a challenge. It is important for the community to own this work and for United Way to be one of the key partners and an influence. But it does not mean that it always has to be branded as United Way or that we own it. No one organization can get results on an issue without partnering with other organizations, providers, civic organizations, and public private partnerships.

It is a constant conversation and challenge to align resources to make sure they support the United Way goals of achieving impact and also the needs of the community. We have that conversation with the board frequently to get its view of the work. There is not a template on this. There is not a stamped down answer. It is a continuous improvement journey.

Mastripolito: Collective impact work is a challenge. Sharing resources and credit is one reason – making sure the work moves forward so everyone can come along. But we know that the work needs to be done. The challenge for most United Ways as they move into collective impact is to decide where the work that they have been doing is in relation to collective impact efforts. The United Way in Salt Lake throws all they have into it. Others do not. That is one of messiest parts of it.

Q: How else is collective impact a shift for United Ways?

Rivera: When I say ‘collective impact is the future of the United Way,’ it does not mean we drive it. Collective impact for some might mean a seat at the table, so you do some of the work or support others who are doing backbone work on key issues in a community to bring about system change.

It is not enough to say ‘We have to have increased funding for more food to feed people who are hungry’ if we do nothing to mitigate the root causes of their hunger. People want to have better opportunities to take charge of their lives. That necessitates system change and how people pursue resources.

Mastripolito: There are a range of challenges, but one is funding. Often, donors want to invest in something for which they can see tangible results quickly. It is easy to say ‘we will give x to this organization and it will fill y number of backpacks so these kids will not be hungry.’

The other side of the coin, though, is that investment which can make a big difference in a system, like the way those kids access food through the week and the way families get support, can be much more powerful, but it’s harder to sell. That kind of system change work is more complicated and takes significant investment in systems, technology and
distribution that cannot be attributed to one specific organization. That can be hard for some individual donors or even corporate contributors to grasp. Some want an easy answer, not a scale and system change answer. And it means multiple organizations will be using the same numbers because they all contributed to making a difference.

Q: Once you took on this role as the anchor for the partnership, what needed to change within your organization to support the work effectively? What recommendations do you have for other United Ways?

Have someone in charge of it.

Rivera: Before Angelo [Gonzales, the Executive Director of Mission: Graduate], we were doing the 2010 strategic plan that led to Mission: Graduate on top of everything else. And then, in order to really move the work of Mission: Graduate forward, we had to add staff because we knew we did not have staff capacity to really build the work. We hired a full-time staff person who is very qualified and had been involved in the work almost from the beginning. The right talent and leadership for collective impact models like Mission: Graduate can make a huge difference.

Borrow capacity.

We had to recognize we did not have capacity to do the work needed to bring baseline data to the partnership and measure progress over time. We did not invest in doing that here. So we did not try to reinvent the wheel, but built off the University of New Mexico partnership to have that capacity.

Be flexible with staff roles.

We have a model where staff can wear more than one hat. One of our development officers is great on public policy, too. And a staff member also is helping support community schools. So adapt the structure to respond to the stakes in this work.

Q: Describe the role you, as the United Way CEO, have played in supporting the alignment of your organization with the partnership’s activities and goals. What would your recommendations be to other United Ways?

Connect the partnership to the strategic plan.

Rivera: We have tried to keep the board involved in monitoring the strategic plan. Jen and others update and report on that all the time, including online. We are always mindful it needs to be connected and communicated. The strategic plan drove Mission: Graduate so we do periodic reports. On most board agendas there is a short report on Mission: Graduate.

Get individual board members involved and focused on the goal.

Spend a lot of time in small group conversations about the work. Several board members are on the Vision Council and subcommittees and that has been key and will be more key as we move forward. The other thing is to keep the board focused on the goal, and not just the mechanics of achieving it. This is very new work. It is a new space and we are trying to feel the success of it ... and the challenge of it. We continue to take a high road position and not be partisan or political. If we pursue the right goals, we will end up in good places.

Create time for the board to fully discuss the implications of the backbone role.

Mastripolito: My view is that we could have had more strategic conversations with the board up front, as we were building out the collective impact effort. It was important to get going and move things forward faster than we might have done in retrospect ... there were times when we could have made presentations and spent more time with the board, paused, and looked more at questions in depth. I am not saying I regret our path, but my two cents for other United Ways—take time to make sure all your leadership is on the same page. If you get significant questions as you present the work, then pause and take time for a strategic conversation.