

Redefining the United Way & Organized Labor Partnership for Michigan

Background: The partnership between United Way and Organized Labor is steeped in a long history and strongly tied to workplace campaigns. A core value of the labor movement is community services directed to its members and their families. A core value of United Way is maximizing its relationships to yield support of its mission.

In strong labor states and communities, liaison programs continue to play a critical role in the relationship between Organized Labor and United Ways. A labor liaison program was developed to maximize the community service programs of international unions and the labor movement. In general, the labor liaison reported to the central body of organized labor programmatically and administratively to the United Way. The central body of the labor community for the most part identified and appointed the labor liaison and the United Way underwrote the salary and benefits.

The term “partnership” is used to describe this historical relationship between organized labor and United Way. In many ways it served both entities well for the “golden age” of both organized labor and United Way. As we progress more fully into the 21st century, a “call to action” is being issued to review that historic relationship in terms of both a strategic and operational dimension.

Leaders from both Organized Labor and United Ways across Michigan have formed a task force to redefine this partnership for the future and define a strategy to move in this new direction. Given these most difficult times, now is not the time to abandon our partnership but rather utilize our unique strengths and resources for the betterment of both United Ways and Organized Labor. This effort should result in a transformational change apparent to all participants that a true partnership has emerged reflecting new programmatic requirements for a new generation in the following 3 goal areas:

Expanded the vision of our work together to more fully incorporate labor in the new model of United Way: Building a joint labor and United Way system at the state and local level needs to begin with a clarification of the mutual vision each shares. In a broad context, the vision is defined as what we both desire – “Build Strong Communities”. With that as our guideline, United Ways have recently released a framework for its business model through LIVE UNITED and its “Advancing the Common Good” agenda for carrying out community impact work at the ground level.

United Ways across Michigan have embraced this model and the association utilizes it as the centerpiece of its policy agenda. Within the new MAUW structure, Labor Liaisons have been invited to participate as decision-makers and are actively involved in setting the policy agenda. This activity, coupled with the work of the state labor liaisons to introduce United Way directions through their training activities has increased the understanding of the shared direction to local liaisons statewide.

At the same time, our existing model has provided little opportunity for the state labor liaisons through MAUW to oversee joint progress statewide of any initiatives. As a result, training and understanding on such opportunities has been conducted by the state with no ability to implement successfully through

local labor liaisons. (A great example of this limited ability has been the successful partnership between labor liaisons and Blue Cross Blue Shield to increase MICHild enrollment).

Next Steps:

-Develop a process for putting together a State Labor Liaison Plan on an annual or bi-annual basis. While this process should continue to be overseen by the Organized Labor participants serving on the MAUW Board, it must be expanded to include participation from key stakeholders including United Way leaders and local labor liaisons.

-Strengthen the leadership role of the MAUW Labor Department to carry out activities based on the State Labor Liaison Plan by providing joint work plan activities to be adopted in local work plans.

-Find opportunities to allow local labor liaisons further participation in United Way training opportunities (state & national) to enhance the understanding and implementation of community impact work while also reviewing the education opportunities afforded specifically to labor liaisons through the state association to assure further inclusion of skill-building for United Way positions.

Fresh look at the administrative decision making (both at a state and local level): While the programmatic activities each labor liaison currently carries out is unique, the administrative oversight among each liaison is equally as unique. No clear or consistent role exists for how the central labor body interacts with the United Way in determining the role of the liaison; some liaisons have contracts, others do not. Some United Way leaders participate in crafting job duties for liaisons, others do not.

Regardless of how the decision is reached, one common thread exists: The labor liaisons across the state are committed to being part of the United Way network and are each employed by United Ways. In our past, there is mutual confusion in local communities over whether liaisons serve the United Way or labor. This has also caused confusion among staffs of United Ways when labor liaisons have functioned under separate employment procedures and guidelines. Our intent is to remove this confusion by jointly crafting work plans and identifying the United Way as the Employer of the Labor Liaison.

Next Steps:

-Build an education program of the requirements and expectations of labor liaisons to be shared with labor liaisons and United Way executives with the intent of making them a stronger part of United Way activities.

-Each United Way will have a work plan that has been mutually agreed to by both the Local Labor Council & United Way Executive. A copy of this work plan will be sent to the MAUW state labor liaison.

Operational standards across communities in Michigan and Labor Liaison Programs: We continue to recognize and embrace the local autonomy of both of United Ways and Labor Liaisons to carry out initiatives based on community need which must be maintained in our new direction. Local flexibility is important in our new partnership, but has also caused fragmentation of our system. Turnover, primarily among United Way CEOs, without clear definition and functionality of this unique

position has caused a discounting of the important role and has prevented the state association from helping new leadership better understand the relationship based on differentiation. In addition, small United Ways who do not employ their own liaison are disconnected from the opportunity to understand and embrace the partnership.

The intent of providing operational standards by clarifying the role of a labor liaison is not to dictate activities, but rather to enhance and define our common work statewide based on mutually agreed-upon standards from both United Way & Labor leadership at the state and local levels.

Next Steps:

-Based on its statewide plan, MAUW will develop a contractual template and handbook for local United Ways to consider for its labor liaisons to enhance consistent work plan requirements (without addressing wages, benefits, hours, etc.) and develop a handbook for role of state labor liaisons (displaced workers, resource development, labor leads, etc.).

-MAUW will form a group to develop a mentoring program/orientation for new UW & labor liaisons, and develop/share consistent materials with Small City United Way CEOs, other United Way staff & new board members. Part of this effort will include an annual meeting with all labor liaisons and United Way CEOs.

-Because each United Way remains autonomous, MAUW will create a structure comprised of United Way CEO and Labor Representatives assist in resolving local issues that may arise. Both the MAUW CEO and MAUW State Labor Liaison will serve as staff to this committee. This committee will be empowered to be available for consultation/fact-finding process; act as a guide for state & “professionalization” of HR functions.

On behalf of the task force, we look forward to embarking on the journey to redefine our work and partnership.

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