

Augie Napoli transforms United Way during six-year tenure

BY LYDIA COUTRÉ

In 2016, August “Augie” Napoli brought to United Way of Greater Cleveland his network of relationships, decades of experience in philanthropy and a new vision for the more than 100-year-old nonprofit.

As president and CEO, Napoli shifted United Way’s strategy to focus on tackling poverty and grew the organization’s fundraising totals and sources. Over Napoli’s six-year tenure, United Way brought in nearly \$320 million in total in fundraising.

He officially retires June 30, but will stay on through the end of September when Sharon Sobol Jordan takes over as the new president and CEO.

Napoli will hand over an organization he helped to “modernize,” said Nancy Mendez, who worked with him at United Way until departing last summer to become president and CEO of Starting Point. Napoli not only transformed United Way’s investments into the community but also brought a sense of innovation and equity throughout the work, helping it to be a “relevant, modern United Way” for the community, she said.

Paul Dolan — chairman and CEO of the Cleveland Guardians who’s in his fourth year as chair of the United Way’s Board of Directors — said he “can’t imagine a more transformational time for United Way than what occurred over the past six years under Augie’s stewardship.”

Previously a pass-through entity that spread money from workplace campaigns (once its primary source of revenue), the United Way chapter is now an engaged organization designed to fight poverty with the support of diverse revenue streams, he said.

Napoli was hired for his fundraising acumen, Dolan said.

“But what we got in Augie was a very strong leader (and) visionary who had the courage to push United Way in this new direction,” he said. “And to make us all uncomfortable by raising the specter of racism as a primary cause of

poverty in our community, and really forced us to look at ourselves, what we’ve done — or more accurately, what we’ve not done — and to repurpose United Way in a way that can make a difference.”

Napoli often says he was hired as a change agent. And reflecting on what’s changed during his tenure, he said “just about everything” about the organization that he inherited looks different from today’s United Way.

The biggest change, he said, is “we’ve regained our footing, we know who we are.”

In 2016, it was “hurtling toward irrelevance in the community” — a community, he noted, that has significantly fewer people and corporate headquarters than it did 30 years ago. This fact couldn’t be ignored by an organization that relied at the time solely on workplace campaigns for its fundraising.

Today, the organization is proactive, rather than reactive, and its fundraising approach and investment focus are better aligned to the community and its needs, Napoli said.

“I’m very proud of that, because it was worth doing the work — the blood, sweat and tears — that lots of people put into making this pivot,” he said.

United Way is working to break the cycle of poverty through the Community Hub for Basic Needs and the Impact Institute, both of which were launched under Napoli.

Community Hub for Basic Needs brought data to its community investment process. Dollars raised through that avenue focus on responding to the daily issues facing those living in poverty, such as hunger and homelessness.

The Impact Institute, designed to tackle the root causes of poverty through cross-sector collaboration, aims to find long-term solutions to chronic issues that keep families in generational cycles of poverty. To date, the institute has raised nearly \$55.7 million.

Broadening fundraising beyond



Augie Napoli is retiring from United Way of Greater Cleveland after serving as president and CEO for six years. | CONTRIBUTED

workplace campaigns, and adding additional streams of fundraising — including principal giving and planned gifts — helped grow the annual campaigns.

For the six years of Napoli’s leadership, United Way’s average annual campaign total was \$53.3 million, compared with an annual average of \$41.1 million over the decade prior when the organization relied on just one stream of fundraising revenue, the workplace campaign.

The strategic shift also included narrowing the focus areas of United Way’s fund distribution, which resulted in some historically funded nonprofits losing some or all of their support. Napoli said this was painful but necessary move in order for the organization to be more effective in directing its dollars.

Having established multiple funding streams proved incredibly beneficial for United Way early in the pandemic when individual donors at the lower level put their giving on hold,

foundations and corporations stepped into philanthropy even more and additional government funding was available, said Aaron Petersal, United Way’s vice president for resource development and chief development officer.

Being nimble in those environments is “critical,” and the shift led by Napoli has helped set the organization up for the future, Petersal said. Napoli brought decades of philanthropic experience and understood the various ways to fundraise that many other organizations were already doing — major gifts, planned giving, principal gifts, multi-year commitments, grants, government funding, etc.

“He was the right person too, because having worked in myriad of nonprofits, throughout the city, he already knew the philanthropic community very well,” said Petersal, who worked with Napoli at the Cleveland Museum of Art before joining him at United Way. “Being able to have relationships with people, and communicate and articulate the mission and where we’re

going and what we’re aiming to do, has really resonated with our donors.”

The annual campaign for fiscal year 2022 (ending June 30) will be the organization’s largest in its history, totaling \$75.7 million through June 22, the most recent figures available as of publication deadline. United Way of Greater Cleveland is serving as the steward for a \$50 million, five-year investment from Cleveland Clinic into the Lead Safe Home Fund announced in January, which helped boost this year’s total.

In a statement, Dr. Tom Mihaljevic, president and CEO of the Clinic, said Napoli’s leadership “greatly impacted how Greater Cleveland regards those in need.”

“He has built impactful community partnerships that will continue to improve many lives in our community,” Mihaljevic said. “Cleveland Clinic has been honored to work with Augie and the United Way on crucial community issues, especially as part of the Lead Safe Coalition and the Impact Institute.”

Underlining all of Napoli’s work at United Way was a commitment to equity, said Mendez, who had been at United Way for several years before Napoli joined. She said before him, words like “racism” and “poverty” weren’t really discussed. But he talked about racism, poverty, root causes of poverty, structural racism and its effects on poverty, she said, noting that this was a couple of years before the murder of George Floyd elevated structural racism and equity to a broader national conversation.

“I don’t think people give Augie enough credit that he started that at United Way, way before that conversation. He was already talking about promoting and hiring the voices of Black and brown people and LGBT community,” Mendez said. “I’m Latina. I’m also a proud member of the LGBT community. And that didn’t matter. If anything, he saw it as an asset.”

Napoli’s commitment to equity and innovation is ultimately what transformed the United Way and served as a call to action for others to follow that path, Mendez said.

“I think he challenged a lot of organizations to think the same way,” she said.

Sharon Sobol Jordan to lead United Way of Greater Cleveland

BY LYDIA COUTRÉ

Sharon Sobol Jordan, a veteran local nonprofit and human services leader, will be the next president and CEO of United Way of Greater Cleveland, pending full approval of its board of directors Monday, June 27.

Jordan will start on Sept. 30, succeeding Augie Napoli, who’s retiring after leading the organization since 2016.

“United Way of Greater Cleveland’s core belief that social and economic change cannot be achieved without racial justice, together with its focus on permanently disrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty, deeply resonates with me,” Jordan said in a provided statement. “I have shared this same commitment and passion in my own work over the last 35 years, and joining the United Way team is completely aligned with my values and sense of purpose.”

Paul Dolan, board chair of United Way, called Jordan a “consensus builder,” and said her ability to form community partnerships fits well with the organization’s current model, which was honed under Napoli’s leadership.

The organization is focused on eradicating the cycle of poverty through a dual-pronged approach: by treating its symptoms (such as homelessness and hunger) through its Community Hub for Basic Needs while also upending its root causes (like racism and access to stable housing) through its Impact Institute.

“I think what stood out for Sharon, though, when she got in front of the search committee, was her personal passion for the mission of addressing poverty in our community and economic and racial justice,” said Dolan, chairman and CEO of the Cleveland Guardians. “You look across her 35-year career, and much of it has been

dedicated to that cause. But you saw her personal investment in that space.”

When Napoli announced his retirement last fall, United Way’s board launched a national search through a 13-member search committee, headed by board member Brian Richardson, executive vice president and chief administrative officer of Independence-based Covia. Selected from a diverse pool of nearly 50 candidates, Jordan will be the first female CEO of the organization in its 122-year history, according to a news release.

Napoli officially retires June 30 but will remain on through September to ensure a smooth transition.

“I feel really, really proud to turn the keys of the car over to the next person because they’re going to find an organization in really good shape, with so much potential and momentum behind it,” Napoli said.

Jordan comes to United Way with extensive leadership experience in a wide-ranging career. Her resume includes public service and nonprofit and for-profit organizations in various sectors.

“She truly has a unique resume that fits United Way perfectly, because she’s spent her career both working in the private sector and the public sector,” Dolan said. “She’s been with traditional organizations, she’s been with innovative organizations, and I think that fits real well with what United Way is today.”

She is founder and CEO of OpenSpace Solutions LLC, which advises leaders and organizations, including Digital C, a Cleveland-based nonprofit digital equity tech startup, where she currently serves as interim CEO. Prior to OpenSpace, Jordan was president and board member at Unify Labs, a nonprofit tech innovation center formed in 2017 to power in-

clusive prosperity.

She’s served as chief of staff for Cuyahoga County. Before that, she worked as the city of Cleveland director of law and special counsel to former Mayor Michael R. White.

As president and CEO of The Centers for Families and Children, Jordan led the merger and integration of three social service agencies and grew the combined organization.

A Cleveland native, she began her career as an associate and then partner at the Cleveland law firm Schneider Smeltz Speith Bell.

Jordan, who serves on numerous boards, earned a law degree and a master of business administration degree from Ohio State University and a bachelor of science degree from Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

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