

SPECIAL REPORT | **NONPROFITS****ABOUT  
GORDON  
MCHENRY  
JR.****Age:** 64**Position:**  
President and  
CEO, United  
Way of King  
County**Years in  
position:** 2**Family:**  
Wife, Dorina  
Calderon-  
McHenry;  
three adult  
children:  
Mariesa,  
Alexander,  
Austin; and  
family dog,  
Remy**Hometown:**  
Seattle**Residence:**  
Seattle**Education:**  
Seattle  
University,  
Georgetown  
University**Career:**  
President and  
CEO of Solid  
Ground (7  
years), director  
of external  
affairs, the  
Boeing Co. (7  
years), seniorassociate,  
Perkins Coie (5  
years)

# 'I have hope that we can accelerate long-overdue change'

## GORDON MCHENRY JR. SHARES BIGGEST CHALLENGES AS HEAD OF UNITED WAY OF KING COUNTY

**BY PATTI PAYNE** | [plpayne@msn.com](mailto:plpayne@msn.com), 206-234-6827, @Patti\_Payne

**T**he Covid-19 pandemic continues to expose both the beautiful and the ugly side of society, as the virus persists in taking a relentless toll in communities throughout Washington. Gordon McHenry Jr., president and CEO of United Way of King County, the fourth-largest United Way in the nation in terms of fundraising, has been at the helm of this human services provider since October 2019, just months before the pandemic hit. **¶** The Business Journal spoke to McHenry about the challenges he has faced the last couple of years, including those created by the pandemic and issues of equity that have come to the forefront.

**What has been your impression of this job in less than two years?**

It's intense, fast, challenging, full of urgent need and there is opportunity to have immediate impact. For too many in our community, this time period is still one of survival, and we remain very concerned with the long road to recovery that's facing members of our community who were struggling well before Covid.

**What is the most challenging aspect of this pandemic period for you?**

I have a great team at United Way, but I know that they and other human service providers have struggled personally and professionally with the magnitude of unprecedented needs and the stress to respond to them: housing instability, food insufficiency, the loss of income and, of course, health. That weighs on us at United Way and other human service providers and essential services nonprofits. And second, the individual and collective confirmation that for folks who are Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) that we don't yet belong in this country and this region that we know and love.

**Is that more pronounced here in Washington?**

Not more than other parts of the country, but it's pronounced, and there are aspects of hypocrisy that exist when you are discussing a region that espouses progressive values but is unwilling and unable to make that a reality for the BIPOC folks who live here. Speaking for myself and many leaders of color, we are close to being exhausted from the cycle that goes from denial to awareness, sympathy, empathy and then just repeats. There's insufficient action or change. A lot of us in positions of power and strength were talking about the fact that people see us leading, and respect our work and the institutions we lead. But yet we are still the same people struggling to be treated as human, with dignity, when we're not in our CEO identity. We know exactly who we are and how society sees us. This is a conversation that's happening daily. And yet I see this as an incredible opportunity going forward, to finally get serious and to be action-oriented around the goal of achieving racial justice for our community. That's why I get up every morning and do what I do. I love this community and I have hope that we can accelerate



**Gordon McHenry Jr. is president and CEO of United Way of King County.**

long-overdue change.

**How specifically are you working to achieve that change?** At United Way we are increasing our focus on Black and Indigenous, specifically, in terms of where we are investing our services and grants. The folks

that are farthest from community and resources are our priorities. We are taking a lot more time to be in community, listening and learning and only acting after we have learned, gained trust and understand their proposed solutions. Only then do we act. For instance, the Black



UNITED WAY OF KING COUNTY

Indigenous Fund operates the same way, with \$2 million over two years. The Community Food Fund, a partnership with UWKC, city of Seattle and also the Shultz Family Foundation gave food to more than 40,000 people through 27 nonprofits and community organizations last year.

So far this year 12 partner organizations are dispersing food to thousands more. All the grantees are BIPOC-led or supporting BIPOC and immigrant and refugee communities. And we've helped 6,000 students at two-year colleges with 27,000-plus interventions like financial support, food, car repair, books, mental health and rental assistance.

**What's the goal of United Way's annual fundraising campaign with Doug Baldwin as campaign chair this year?** For this current fiscal year 2022, our overall fundraising goal is \$52 million. Last year, fiscal year 2021, we raised over \$69 million, much of which was Covid relief from federal, state, county and city governments. There's been a challenge getting some of the rental assistance dollars to the need, but we're now making good progress.

**What is your message to the business community?** We're surviving Covid because we came together as a caring, compassionate, generous community. The key to success is to continue to be a connected and generous business community that will join United Way and others in the hard, intentional work to achieve racial justice. We're confident there will be both health and economic recovery, but the concern is that it is equitable, and that everyone in our community benefits from the recovery.

**What about your message to the community in general?** We benefit from having a strong philanthropic nonprofit community. People should give where their heart leads them. It's hard to have a viable, thriving community when thousands of people are facing homelessness or are unable to feed themselves and their families, and students studying to secure a living-wage job are also at risk. If you agree those are vital needs, then I urge folks to continue to invest in United Way.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

Community Building Collective has unrestricted United Way funds of \$3 million for two years – some 15 black leaders of BIPOC-serving organizations are helping us understand the greatest needs and solutions. They decide how and where that money is invested. Our

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