

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Volunteer Attorneys Enable CT United Way Mergers**

WHITE PLAINS, New York (January 26, 2009) – On July 1, 2008, United Way of Eastern Fairfield County and United Way of Westport-Weston merged to become United Way of Coastal Fairfield County.

The process began in March 2007, when the Boards of Directors of both United Ways voted to join and signed a Memorandum of Understanding to start the strategic process to create a broader, regional entity. The Pro Bono Partnership, a nonprofit legal assistance provider serving Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, provided two different teams of volunteer attorneys to represent both entities through every step of this process. Representing United Way of Eastern Fairfield County were lawyers from GE Money and the law firm of Robinson and Cole. Representing United Way of Westport-Weston, were John Canning, former General Counsel of Rayonier, and the law firm of Wiggin and Dana. Merle Berke-Schlessel, President & CEO of the merged organization, who was also President & CEO of the former United Way of Eastern Fairfield County and is an attorney herself, said “Our merger would not have been possible without the expert legal team we were provided through the Pro Bono Partnership. We were guided through the negotiation, due diligence and review process by skilled lawyers from top firms.”

With the assistance of the Partnership’s pro bono attorneys, a joint Transition Team comprised of Board members from each organization worked to create and define the mission, vision, strategic goals, governance structure and other needed components to bring this new United Way to life.

The new United Way of Coastal Fairfield County’s mission is: “Together, we mobilize our communities to improve people’s lives. Our vision is to advance the common good by creating opportunities for a better life for all. Working with many partners, United Way is focused on the building blocks that we all need for a good life: a quality education that leads to a stable job, income that can support a family through retirement, and good health.”

According to a joint press release issued in June 2008 by both United Ways, “A national movement is also underway to structure United Way’s work in the areas of Education, Income and Health. By focusing on these building blocks for a good life, United Way of Coastal Fairfield County will create opportunities in education that help children and youth achieve their potential, will promote financial stability for individuals and families, and will improve people’s health.” The Boards of Directors felt that the merger would “create a stronger foundation upon which to build a healthy social environment for residents of many income levels including an active senior population.”

A merger will also take place between United Way of Coastal Fairfield County and United Way of Norwalk & Wilton. The Partnership recruited volunteers to represent both entities in the new merger process, which was originally scheduled for completion by July 1, 2009. John Canning and Wiggin and Dana are representing United Way of Coastal Fairfield County. The law firm of Day Pitney and Don Liu, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of Xerox are representing United Way of Norwalk & Wilton.

“The legal representation was so good, “ said Berke-Schlessel, “that the Norwalk Wilton merger has been approved by both boards and will be effective February 1st, not July 1st. The Partnership’s legal teams saved the United Ways tens of thousands of dollars in scarce resources that can be used to improve the community and have contributed to making the system stronger and better able to respond to the challenges of this difficult economic environment.”

“We have been truly fortunate to have the dedication and commitment of our board members and the assistance of these teams of outstanding volunteer attorneys,” stated Berke-Schlessel. “The merger process is a long one, and as volunteers, they devoted a great deal of their personal time so that our United Way could be successful and the most effective in helping the residents and workers in our communities.”

United Way of Coastal Fairfield County encompasses the towns of Fairfield, Trumbull, Bridgeport, Stratford, Easton, Westport, Monroe and Weston. Upon the completion of the merger with United Way of Norwalk & Wilton, the towns of Norwalk, Wilton and Darien will also be part of this regional United Way.

The Pro Bono Partnership was founded in 1997 by members of the Westchester and Fairfield County corporate bar association to provide business legal services for nonprofit organizations serving the poor and otherwise disadvantaged and pro bono opportunities to in house attorneys at major corporations. With the assistance more than 450 business attorneys from major corporations and law firms throughout the tri-state area annually, the Partnership is able to leverage its own limited resources and a small in-house legal staff for the benefit of about 350 nonprofits on as many as 600 different legal matters each year. Partnership staff attorneys oversee the program, provide support for clients and volunteers, are available to answer brief telephone queries from nonprofit organizations throughout the region and provide as many as 50 educational workshops annually to help ensure that nonprofits can pro-actively adopt best practices, avoid common pitfalls and operate in compliance with laws and regulations.

With the exception of modest charges for assistance with incorporation and some workshops, the Partnership does not charge its clients. Instead, it relies on annual grants from corporations, foundations, law firms and generous individuals. In Fairfield County, the program’s funders include, among others, the GE Foundation, JPMorgan Chase & Co., RBS Greenwich Capital, Xerox Corporation, Fairfield County Bar Foundation, Fairfield County Community Foundation, The Inner-City Foundation for Charity & Education and the law firm of Robinson & Cole LLP, which also provides offices for the Partnership in Stamford and Hartford. The Partnership’s main office is in White Plains, NY; its New Jersey office is in Parsippany.

The Partnership serves nonprofit organizations serving the disadvantaged, as well as arts, civic, environmental and conservation organizations, in Fairfield County and the Greater Hartford area in Connecticut; Westchester, Orange, Putnam and Rockland Counties in New York; and throughout New Jersey.

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