

LOUISVILLE BUSINESS FIRST

COVER STORY

YEAR ONE LEADING METRO UNITED WAY

*Adria Johnson talks about
her first year as CEO of
Metro United Way as it
refocuses on who it serves
and how it serves them.*

ELEANOR TOLBERT,
PAGES 4-6



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IN PERSON

What Adria Johnson has learned from her first year as CEO of Metro United Way

The Louisville native came into the role just as United Way began changing the way it provides funds to communities

BY ELEANOR TOLBERT | etolbert@bizjournals.com | 502-498-1942 | @BFLouEleanor

If Adria Johnson were to go back one year ago and give herself a piece of advice, it would be to be patient.

Johnson took over as president and CEO of Metro United Way from her predecessor, Theresa Reno-Weber, in August 2021, becoming the organization's first Black CEO. One year later, she's faced unexpected challenges, loss and incredible rewards.

Stepping into the role, Johnson, who previously served as chief impact officer since 2018, said there's a variety of reasons she's needed to remain patient and pace herself. There are the new duties of being CEO and reintroducing herself to the team. There are the lingering impacts of Covid-19 and social justice issues plaguing the Louisville community.

Most notably, United Way's national organization began shaking up its operations right before she moved into the position. It became Johnson's responsibility to continue carrying out the adjusted and more centralized mission locally.

"You're doing all of the internal team-building and there are only so many hours in the day when you're also out and about in the community, trying to meet and greet and develop relationships with an exhaustive list of individuals," Johnson said. "It's OK to give myself some grace – to recognize that, yes, you wake up and give it your 100%, but it's OK if it might take a little bit longer to get to a few things, especially with the nature of this work and what we're trying to accomplish."

IN DETAIL

ADRIA JOHNSON

Title: President & CEO, Metro United Way

Age: 51

Hometown: Born and raised right here in the Ville!

Lives: Middletown

Recent career history: Commissioner and deputy commissioner, Kentucky Department for Community Based Services, 2012-18; various roles in Louisville Metro Government, including capital planning analyst in the office of management and budget to acting and director of the Department of Community Services and Revitalization, 2005-12; various roles held in the private sector for the first half of career at Humana Inc., LG&E and Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corp., 1994-2004

Education: Bachelor's degree in accounting, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, 1994; completed several post-graduate courses from the University of Louisville

Family: Daughter, Brenlie; son, Kenneth (KJ); two grandchildren, Kye and Amerie

A new way of doing things

Before Johnson's time as CEO, Metro United Ways across the U.S., including Louisville, had begun introducing a new model to impact communities more effectively.

Johnson said the organization was known for instituting a community chest model, which refers to cultivating an endowment fund that was used for community giving. Metro United Way previously committed to supporting certain partners year after year, which she said was an antiquated way of looking at it.

"We were spread very broadly and very thinly and that just didn't allow us to have the depth of focus and commitment, quite frankly, to really start to attack these challenges and to attack them at the root," Johnson said. "To get away from dealing with just the symptoms that make you feel like you're in a more reactive kind of crisis mode versus really stepping back strategically."

She stepped into the role when the organization was in the throes of transitioning to a new way of doing things. Johnson said Metro United Way is completely removed from its historical investments and is instead focused on two pillars: closing the gaps in educational success and wealth attainment.

Metro United Way also is shifting its focus on specific neighborhoods. It will be putting an emphasis on neighborhoods across the areas it serves that are struggling the most, which tend to be neighborhoods predominately home to people of color, she said.

"Having those North Stars and being able to clearly articulate to the

Adria Johnson
in Metro United
Way's headquarters
in Downtown
Louisville.

community, being able to clearly focus our goals and priorities in those areas, has been incredibly helpful and we think will be incredibly impactful," Johnson said.

The group is starting with the California neighborhood in West Louisville. Johnson said the new approach doesn't assume what a community needs. Instead, it involves building trust with the neighbors and asking them what they need.

Johnson called it trust-based philanthropy. Coming out of the past few years, with concerns over the pandemic and social justice, she said many neighborhoods haven't had the level of resources or attention they need, therefore making them distrustful of the systems in place in our city.

"We had to recognize that, right or wrong, Metro United Way may be viewed as part of a system that requires some trust-building," Johnson said.

The organization recruited individuals from within those communities that could go out and help conduct community conversations. And she said they didn't just go out once. Metro United Way then held a series of lis-



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tening sessions to hear from residents about what they really need.

What they learned is that homeowners in the California neighborhoods are really interested in, not just how to attain wealth, but how to be able to pass it on to future generations.

Accomplishing goals in year one

Aside from transitioning to this new model, Johnson said there are certain goals she and her team are very happy to have completed in just the first year.

The organization launched its Black L.O.V.E Philanthropic Partnership, an effort that is intended to empower and invest in Black-led social change. L.O.V.E. stands for live, own, vote and excel. The organization’s website notes 19 nonprofits were included in the first round of funding.

“That really is an effort that is intended to attack the roots of systemic inequities that exist, but by giving the power to those that are impacted by those inequities,” Johnson said. “Giving them the power and the authority to really govern that funding.”

Johnson said a big part of trust-based philanthropy is being less pre-

scriptive with what the funding given to different organizations has to go to. Instead, the organizations are able to choose how it will best be used.

In 2020, Metro United Way received a \$20 million gift from billionaire philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, the largest in the organization’s history. Johnson said that a significant portion of the MacKenzie Scott gift was dedicated to the L.O.V.E partnership.

When forming the L.O.V.E partnership, Metro United Way did a dive into the history of philanthropy in Louisville, learning there is a need for an effort like the L.O.V.E partnership to exist in this philanthropic landscape. She said their research found that making sure Black communities excel has been overlooked.

“When you look at all of the philanthropy that has flowed into this community, a very, very, very small portion has actually gone toward the tenants of Black L.O.V.E.– of living, owning, voting and excelling– to really lift that community,” Johnson said.

On a personal note

One driver for Johnson is the person-

al connection she has with the work she’s doing.

The Louisville native has an understanding of how important philanthropy is because she’s been in the same position as many who need assistance.

Growing up, Johnson said she lived an idyllic childhood until her parents got divorced. The shift thrust her family into challenging economic times. She said she now understands the pain of poverty and knows it’s not always based on life choices.

“It is not because of poor choices, which, sadly, is often what is ascribed to why people are experiencing what they are experiencing,” Johnson said. “You know, I had two college educated parents and life happened.”

Johnson’s family did overcome some of their financial struggles, which she said also helped her to understand what it takes to get out of that kind of a situation. Philanthropy takes a lot of patience, she said, as getting back on one’s feet is a long process.

“That experience and reality and

BY THE NUMBERS

METRO UNITED WAY

Metro United Way works with partners to provide children, individuals and families with the resources they need — education, health or financial — in Bullitt, Jefferson, Oldham and Shelby counties in Kentucky and Clark, Floyd and Harrison counties in Indiana. More than 300,000 people were affected by Metro United Way supported programs in the region in the past year.

Louisville Business First research shows that Metro United Way’s most recent gross annual income was \$21.9 million. That was down from the previous year of \$47.3 million, which included a \$20 million gift from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

– Allison Stines

Here are a few figures from Metro United Way for the last year:

74,578

people contacted Metro United Way’s 2-1-1 call center for emergency assistance and referral

52,902

people were helped with immediate needs through Metro United Way supported programs

12,989

people were sheltered by emergency and transitional housing services through Metro United Way supported programs

8,120

people sought free tax assistance; Metro United Way helped return \$8.9 million in refunds to those people

5,299

households avoided foreclosure, eviction or homelessness through rent and mortgage assistance

3,000+

the number of people participated in Racial Wealth Gap simulations

2,057

Individuals in homeless-prevent programs; 77% made progress toward financial sufficiency

1,150

people sought skills development and training; 85% attained gainful employment

68

The number of Metro United Way employees

More from Johnson

Q&A **How do you motivate your employees?** By attempting to bring the best version of myself to work each and every day and being the chief enthusiast for the work of Metro United Way.

What leadership traits have helped you along the way? Authenticity, humility, compassion, integrity, resilience and courage.

What advice would you give a new boss? If you don't already have "safe spaces" that you can lean on for support, venting, strategizing, etc., find them.

What do you think is Louisville's best-kept secret? Ollie's Trolley.

What skill would you most like to improve? Patience — when you're trying to find solutions to struggles that are rooted in systemic issues, that are long-standing and widespread, it's really difficult to accept "it takes time" and solving for these challenges requires long-term strategies and investment. Especially when you know what it's like to struggle and know what that means for those in the struggle.

What do you listen to on your way to work? The Steve Harvey Morning Show (Nephew Tommy's prank phone calls) or The Jubal Show (first date follow up) — both are HILARIOUS!



On the front steps of the Metro United Way offices, several staff members showed their support of Pride Month.

METRO UNITED WAY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

understanding really motivate me strongly, especially sitting in this seat, to really temper expectations around what it takes to lift out," Johnson said. "You want to feel that your dollars are making a difference, and I completely respect that,

but I think the misplaced expectation is often not understanding that these challenges don't necessarily resolve themselves in a year."

Her family helped her to get to where she is now, something she said she'll always be grateful for.

In her first year as CEO of Metro United Way, along with leading her

team and accomplishing her goals, Johnson lost both of her parents.

"They were so proud of my accomplishment at becoming CEO that it just really — just adds a layer of sadness because they're not here to see all of the things that I'm helping to lead and bring to this community," Johnson said. ▬

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Nonprofit Visionary Leader Awards:
Our new program honors 12 leaders who've made changes
or advancements at their organizations, PAGES 4-15

Largest corporate cash contributors, PAGES 18-24

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