

MERLE BERKE-SCHLESSEL, ESQ.

President and Chief Executive Officer
United Way of Coastal Fairfield County



Merle Berke-Schlessel, Esq. joined United Way of Eastern Fairfield County as President and Chief Executive Officer May 15, 2001 following a 6-month national search by United Way's Board of Directors. In 2008 the United Way of Eastern Fairfield County merged with the United Way of Westport and Weston forming the United Way of Coastal Fairfield County. In 2009, Ms. Berke-Schlessel led the organization through a second merger with the United Way of Norwalk and Wilton.

Ms. Berke-Schlessel began her career as a regional planner in human services. Many of the concepts and programs she developed are thriving institutions serving children and families today; including the deinstitutionalization of status offenders and the establishment of municipal Youth Service Bureaus. In 1989 Governor O'Neill appointed Ms. Berke-Schlessel as a Hearing Officer for the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, where for eight years she periodically presided over cases of workplace and housing discrimination. She was awarded a citation from the Connecticut General Assembly for her outstanding service to the State of Connecticut and the Commission.

Ms. Berke-Schlessel has also served in municipal government. She was an assistant corporation Counsel for the City of New Haven and the first executive director of New Haven's Livable City Initiative. She has worked in the private practice of law, served as bank counsel, and for four years, General Counsel and Vice President of the J.E. Robert Company, an international asset management firm. At the J.E. Robert Company, Ms. Berke-Schlessel was an officer of the company and served as the FDIC attorney-in-fact, managing the resolution of over 800 distressed real estate and commercial loans.

In her ten years with United Way, Ms. Berke-Schlessel has positioned the organization as the premier community leader toward the betterment of the Coastal Fairfield region, marking significant accomplishments in the areas of ending homelessness, education reform and creating stable families and communities.

United Way's role demands that it serve as an honest arbiter of community needs and solutions. Berke-Schlessel sees United Way's obligation to finding innovative solutions to the toughest problems as the most rewarding challenge of her position. "It is our job is to advance the common good, by bringing people, service providers, community partners, government and financial resources together to improve the quality of life for every member of our diverse regional community."

Ms. Berke-Schlessel co-chaired with the Mayor of Bridgeport, the leadership team guiding six communities in the development of a *Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness*. The Internationally recognized *Plan* is being implemented by the community through the support of the United Way. Berke-Schlessel was chosen as a US delegate to attend the International Homelessness Seminar in London to address the successes being accomplished in the Greater Bridgeport Area. Berke-Schlessel was invited to the White House to attend the Compassion Capital Roundtable to discuss the issues surrounding homelessness. The CT Coalition to End Homelessness honored United Way with the Community Leadership Award at their Annual Meeting. The United Way of Coastal Fairfield has recently extended its leadership in ending homelessness into the Norwalk area.

In the area of early childhood, Ms. Berke-Schlessel serves in a leadership role. Together with Bridgeport's Mayor and School Superintendent she mobilized the community to create *Bridgeport's Blueprint for Young Children*. She was appointed co-convenor, with the Mayor and Superintendent of the Bridgeport Alliance for Young Children, charged with the oversight of the implementation of the *Blueprint*.

In her work to close the achievement gap and improve the high school graduation rate, Ms. Berke-Schlessel was appointed as a member of the Superintendent's Strategic Planning team to create a new mission and vision for the public schools. She served as member of the board of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council and co-chaired its Quality Education Council. Under her leadership the United Way implemented six *Schools of Hope*, improving the reading scores of more than 2,500 children. She is also responsible for the creation of the

Mentoring Institute linking all the mentoring programs in the region to maximize their impact as well as the kids back pack program providing food for children over the weekend.

Under her leadership the United Way has partnered with the Human Services Council of Norwalk to create a regional volunteer center engaging thousands of donors in collecting 100,000 books, 400,000 diapers, and recruitment of countless tutors, mentors and budget coaches to help individuals achieve success and improve community conditions. The volunteers also provide services to a network of regional non-profits.

Ms. Berke-Schlessel is Chair of the CEO Forum of the Tri-State United Ways of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. She is a member of the United Way Worldwide Regional Operating Council for the Tri-State area and served as the co-chair of the Regional System Design Group. Berke-Schlessel is a member of the National Presidents Roundtable for United Way. She served on the United Way of Connecticut Public Policy Committee. Ms. Berke-Schlessel is a frequent speaker and panelist on the impact of philanthropy and current community trends and best practices.

A lifelong New Haven resident, Berke-Schlessel currently resides in Branford. She is the mother of two, daughter Arna Zohlman of Brooklyn New York, and son David, a post doctoral researcher in Beijing, China. She is the proud grandmother of Gabriel Eli Zohlman. Her husband Robert is a surgeon in private practice, the Medical Director of Temple Recovery Center and a clinical professor at Yale Medical School.

QUICK FACTS ABOUT MERLE BERKE-SCHLESSEL, ESQ.

Education

- Special Student, Yale University Divinity School
- Juris Doctor, magna cum laude, Quinnipiac University College of Law
- Master of Arts, summa cum laude, University of Toledo
- Bachelor of Arts, Boston University

Professional and Related Experience

- Executive Director (1999 - 2001)
Women & Family Life Center, Guilford, Conn.
- Vice President for Development and Strategic Planning (1997-1999)
Jewish Home for the Aged, New Haven, Conn.
- Executive Director (1996)
City of New Haven Livable City Initiative, New Haven, Conn.
- Vice President and General Counsel (1992-1996)
J.E. Robert Company of New England, Milford, Conn.
- Assistant Vice President and Counsel (1991 – 1992)
Connecticut Savings Bank, New Haven, Conn.
- Private and Municipal Attorney (1986-1991)
Regional Planner (1975 – 1983)
South Central Criminal Justice Supervisory Board and New Haven Department of Police Service, New Haven, Conn.
- Hearing Officer (1989 – 1997)
Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, Hartford, Conn.

Selected Board Participation and Affiliations

- The Bank of Fairfield, Board of Directors, Chair Community Reinvestment Committee
- Bridgeport Regional Business Council, Board of Directors, Co-Chair Quality Education Council
- Congregation Mishkan Israel, Hamden, Conn., Past President

- Connecticut Anti-Defamation League, Past Development Chair and Executive Committee
- Bethesda Nursery School, New Haven, Conn., Past Member Board of Directors
- Admitted to practice in Connecticut and Federal Courts
- Connecticut Bar Association, Past Member
- American Bar Association, Past Member
- Connecticut Trial Lawyers Association, Past Member
- The Association of Trial Lawyers of America, Past Member

Awards

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Award, Urban League of Southern Connecticut (2008)
- The Jeffrey Wallace Award, Connecticut Community Development Association (2007)
- Community Service Award, Music and Arts Center for Humanity (2004)
- FLECHAS, Inc. Award for Leadership and Service to the Hispanic Community, New Haven, Conn. (2001)
- Award of Merit from Congregation Mishkan Israel Brotherhood in Recognition of Service to the Congregation (2000)
- Citation from the Connecticut General Assembly in Recognition of Contributions and Dedication as a Hearing Officer (1999)
- Certificate of Merit and Appreciation from the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (1999)
- Governor's Award for Distinguished Service to the Department of Children and Youth Services as Chair of the Advisory Committee (1979)
- Outstanding Young Woman in America (1978)