

Keynote Address
Windham Region United Way Annual Meeting
April 9, 2008

It is wonderful to see all of you here tonight. The university is very pleased to host the 57th Annual Meeting of the Windham Region United Way.

For many years I was involved with United Way in Boston and the after-school programs that were established there. I am delighted that Eastern has such a close association with our local United Way, and am honored that one of our own — Lourdes Ardel — will be recognized tonight as the Windham Region United Way's Maurice Heon, Sr., Volunteer of the Year.

I want to talk with you for a few minutes tonight about young children and families, especially those who are at risk. A commitment to children and families is a big part of the United Way's history and remains a focus of the organization. Improving critical services to young children and families also is a major initiative in Connecticut, as I will detail in a moment, and is the central mission of Eastern's Child and Family Development Resource Center, which is located just a few hundred yards to the north of us.

Providing comprehensive support to mothers, children, and the family unit is fundamental to improving the chances of children who are at risk. From Denver to Augusta, Maine, from Toledo to Virginia — all across our land, more than 1,300 United Ways, their national partners, and the local agencies they support, are implementing innovative strategies in support of children and families, through direct services, through public policy, and through community change efforts.

I mentioned Denver because that is where the United Way got its start in 1887—two years before Eastern was born as the Willimantic State Normal School. In 1918, the American Association for Community Organizations, the precursor to the United Way, was formed. By 1948, more than 1,000 communities had established a United Way chapter. In 1974, for the first time, United Way raised more than \$1 billion. In 1996, the United Way of America identified healthy children, healthy families, and healthy communities as the focus of its strategic plan.

There is no doubt that improving services and support at the earliest stages of a child's development is an urgent need facing our society. One of three children is born into poverty, and one in three is at least a year behind in school. Forty-six percent of kindergarten children are at risk, while economically disadvantaged children enter kindergarten 1-2 years behind in language and other skills development. By age 5, children in high-risk environments can be two years behind developmentally, and that gap persists over time. We have much work to do.

I am encouraged by two major projects of the national United Way organization that speak to the needs of young children — “Success by 6” and the related “Born Learning” campaign. “Success by 6” now has 350 coalitions in local communities, advocating for public policies, increasing access to services, and supporting parent education, healthcare, literacy, and other programs. In the past five years, more than 500,000 children have benefited. “Born Learning” uses an advertising campaign and website to provide research-based information for parents on how to create learning opportunities for young children in home settings.

These two programs reflect the same scientific research that educators, civic leaders, and service organizations in Connecticut are now using. Some of you may have been at the Early Childhood Summit that was held in Newington this past January. United Way of Connecticut was very involved in the summit. We heard from experts in the field from Harvard University, from our own Connecticut Departments of Education and Social Services, and from other concerned professionals. Here is what they told us:

- The experiences of very young children impact their development for the rest of their lives. The first three years of life are critical. In fact, the very architecture of the brain—how neurological connections are formed—can be enhanced or diminished by how parents interact with young children and by the external stimuli of those children. For instance, language skill development are especially impacted by the amount of reading, singing, and vocalization that occurs in a home.
- A comprehensive approach to supporting children and families at risk must include health and nutrition, pre-natal care and other support for pregnant women, pre-school education, employment opportunities for parents, and other essential support services.
- Programs such as Head Start that provide development and support for both children **and** their parents are especially effective. The need for more professional development support for child care and pre-school providers also has been well documented.

Early intervention strategies that connect education and other care programs make financial sense. A 40-year longitudinal study in Michigan found that every dollar invested in early intervention strategies saves \$17 in avoided social costs (crime, unemployment, health care) and improved productivity.

It is also critical that we recognize the unique barriers in every local environment and then collaborate in a strategic, systematic way to remove them. In Willimantic, where as many as 65-70% of school-age children are Latino, language and cultural issues must be addressed. We cannot wait until a child is in first grade to help that young person learn the English language skills he or she needs to be successful academically. In homes with lower educational levels, support for family literacy also must be a major concern.

Certainly Governor Rell and her advisors understand what I have just told you. The Governor's Early Childhood Initiative, ably led by the Early Childhood Cabinet, has some truly breakthrough objectives. It includes funds to subsidize 4,000 pre-school placements; incentives to keep child care professionals on the job; professional development for those workers; facility improvements that would increase the number of pre-school seats by 4,000 in the next two years; scholarships and loans to support working mothers seeking training and education; and more birth-to-3 programming.

This Early Childhood Initiative is visionary. It is an investment in the future of our state and especially critical to Connecticut residents who need support not only for the basic needs I have outlined, but also need help becoming acculturated into American society.

How can we support this statewide initiative? What are we doing in Windham and Willimantic? Well, for one thing, our local United Way sponsored a community forum on Eastern's campus in September 2006 so that local professionals and residents could help frame the statewide discussion. You also have created several successful local programs that are responding to the issues I have raised tonight. The Windham Parents Network targets local Latino families so that parents become more engaged in their children's learning. The

“Motherhead” and “Fatherhead” literacy initiative gets right at the heart of developing language skills by supporting reading and literacy in the home. The Ensuring Children are Successful initiative mirrors the United Way of the Capital Area’s vision for Successful Children, Families, and Community by supporting early childhood education and improved parenting skills. This spring’s Common Sense Parenting is a specific strategy in that regard.

The value of the United Way in a community such as Willimantic cannot be overemphasized. In a community this size, we have the opportunity to work closely together—educators, public officials, business people, healthcare professionals, nonprofits—to pool resources to impact those most in need. You know our clients by their first name. You see them in the grocery store. Each of you sees some of the same families coming to you for assistance.

We just completed a year-long strategic planning process at Eastern, involving more than 250 faculty, staff, students, alumni and community leaders. We spent a good deal of time gathering and analyzing data. We gave our entire campus community repeated opportunities to share their best ideas and their vision for our future. We listened. And we created a plan that is grounded in data, inspired by shared values, and committed to 18 strategic initiatives for the next five years.

This ability to think strategically and to formulate shared plans based on inter-agency collaboration will be critical for the United Way to do an even better job. That includes identifying needed resources and developing solid accountability measures. Tonight’s vote to fold the WRUW into the Capitol Region was a tough decision to make. But I am confident that, with careful planning and an unwavering devotion to the children and families you serve, you will be successful.

Earlier I mentioned Eastern’s early childhood initiative, only a few minutes’ walk from here. We think we can be a major partner in our local and state efforts to improve the chances of success for young children and their families. Let me tell you just a few things about what’s going on at the center. For one thing, more early childhood educators graduate from Eastern than from any other college or university in Connecticut—more than Central Connecticut State University, Southern Connecticut State University, and Trinity combined.

Our faculty and staff also provide consulting services to everyone from state agencies to local childcare programs. The Child and Family Development Resource Center will eventually have slots for 84 children from the local community—infants to five-year-olds—while acting as a premier research facility. We use video and other technology to document best practices, and have used distance learning technology and produced training videos to share that knowledge with early childhood education professionals throughout the region. Project Navigate, a federally funded program at the Naval Subbase, has provided further opportunities to share professional development opportunities with child care workers in the field.

How the agencies in this community can continue to work together to identify and focus on the programs that can truly make a difference in elevating the lives of local families is the fundamental question facing this body. We at Eastern are dedicated to being part of that discussion. We, like you, want our children to have a bright future. Let us work together towards that goal.

Thank you again, and have a wonderful evening.