

## United Way Holds Finance Forum with Rhode Island Leaders

January 29, 2009

About 75 members of the business and non-profit communities met with Rhode Island's fiscal leaders on January 29 at the year's first Public Policy Roundtable organized by United Way of Rhode Island. The forum's featured speakers included House Finance Chair Representative Steven Costantino, Senate Finance Chair Senator Daniel DaPonte, and Gary Sasse, Director of the RI Department of Revenue.

United Way Board Chair John Warren, welcomed guests to the Forum at the Providence Marriott. He set the tone of the meeting by telling the crowd that these are challenging times around the globe. He praised United Way for creating collaborations with the public and private sector, and nonprofits. "They have brought legislators, business people and representatives of nonprofits together to talk about many subjects including how do we meet human need; how do we make Rhode Island a better place."



Representative Steven Costantino (left) and Senator Daniel DaPonte

Russ Dannecker, former R.I. Senate Fiscal Advisor, began the Forum with a power-point presentation on the state's current budget deficit for FY 2009, which is at about \$357 million. His presentation acted as a segue to a panel discussion led by Christopher Medici, Chairman of United Way's Public Policy Committee.

First to address the audience was Representative Costantino. "The goal is to see that Rhode Island is in a better position coming out of the recession than it was going in." He warned business and community leaders that "We can't afford to repeat what we have done in the past." He identified the global Medicaid waiver and long waits for unemployment insurance claims as the two major issues facing our state.

He reiterated that key to all of the financial issues is that when an upturn does happen Rhode Island needs to be prepared. "The economy will come back. But when? When it does, what will we do?"

The second panel member to speak was Senator Daniel DaPonte, Chair of the Senate Finance Committee. He said that it is all about figuring out what form we are going to be in when we come back. He stressed planning. "We all recognize the severity of the situation," he said. "We have an obligation to supply a safety-net." He urged everyone to understand that the economic woes are not something to approach as needing a band-aid. "The recovery will take major surgery."

The third speaker was Gary Sasse, R.I. Department of Revenue. He told the audience, "We are in uncharted waters. The situation is volatile." He presented a report, showing a marked drop in state funding for 2009-2010. In light of such a bleak revenue report, he urged the audience to position the state so the state can compete. He noted that structural change needs to occur to come out of the recession in better shape.

President and CEO of United Way Anthony Maione concluded the Forum by acknowledging how fortunate we are to live in a state where the private, public, and non-profit sector can meet with the state's major fiscal leaders for an open and honest discussion.