Alejandro Ramirez was one of 130 volunteers from United Way of Miami-Dade and the Girl Scouts of Tropical Florida who participated in a beautification project to repaint the cabins and clean up the outdoor areas of the Girl Scouts of Tropical Florida’s Camp Mahachee on Jan. 19, 2019. “In the hustle and bustle of major metropolitan areas such as Miami, philanthropy can sometimes get lost, just where it is needed most,” says Tony Argiz, chairman and CEO of MBAF. PEDRO PORTALPPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM

In many parts of the country, volunteerism is instilled at a young age and most organizations in small towns and rural counties simply could not function without volunteers. Yet in the hustle and bustle of major metropolitan areas such as Miami, philanthropy can sometimes get lost, just where it is needed most.

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service’s annual report, Florida is the state with the lowest volunteer rates. Among the state’s metropolitan areas, South Florida ranks the worst — meaning it has the lowest volunteerism in the entire nation. Furthermore, according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute on the disparity of wealth in the United States, five of the 10 metro areas with the highest income inequality are in Florida. South Florida is of course one of those, with the top 1 percent of residents earning a staggering 55 times more than the bottom 99 percent.
There’s a logical correlation between volunteer rates and these figures, and it’s clear that our business leaders have the capacity to address this issue.

We have just come to the end of April’s National Volunteer Month, and many of my fellow CEOs and community leaders stepped up with programs and events throughout the month, to help out our local communities.

However, to really make a difference, philanthropy and volunteerism must be something that is part of our corporate cultures — not just for one month out of the year, but all of the time.

By giving back, local businesses are not only benefiting the community, they are benefiting themselves. Think of it this way: Many of you have implemented employee-driven wellness programs and policies to sustain growth and attract new talent, because you know that a happy, healthy, and thriving workforce is essential to your operations. So, too, must the communities around us thrive if our businesses are to succeed and grow within those communities.

Beyond creating an environment where businesses can succeed, corporate giving has a clear and direct benefit on the business itself.

According to a recent study by Deloitte, 6 in 10 millennials chose their current employer because they felt that company was guided by a “greater purpose.” Likewise, a later study by Deloitte also found that participating in volunteer activities fosters positive qualities such as leadership, loyalty and job-satisfaction in employees.

The latest United Way Florida ALICE report, which is an examination of families who are unable to meet the cost of living, found that a staggering 46 percent of Florida households could not afford their basic needs. That number has risen 10 percent since 2010, and the United Way argues that trend will continue upwards unless local policymakers, businesses, nonprofits and others work together to improve our economy.

The report went on to say, “For solutions to be effective, they must be as comprehensive and as interconnected as the problems are. Siloed solutions do not work.” In other words, corporate acts of philanthropy shouldn’t just come in the form of monetary donations by the “C-suite,” but the entire organization.

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I have witnessed the benefits of corporate philanthropy at our own business, MBAF. The firm has long been guided by the act of giving back to the community, and actively encourages its employees to volunteer year-round. This philosophy has had a transformative effect on MBAF and the relationships we built with local nonprofits have fostered an invaluable connection with our community. We are celebrating our 50th anniversary this year, and that milestone would not have been possible without first growing closer to the cities we call home.

Mother Teresa once said, “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.” This is a statement to live by, because no matter how large the problems we face may be or how distant a solution may seem, each of us have the power to make a difference, especially when working together.

Tony Argiz is chairman and CEO of MBAF.