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Dig deep to help others in time of need

It's the perfect storm for nonprofit organizations. During tough economic times when nonprofit organizations are most desperate for money to fund increased demands for services, strapped government entities cut back on their contributions to nonprofits.

And because they feel the financial pinch, too, many individuals cut back on their charitable contributions.

That combination can spell disaster for a community struggling to provide services to those in need.

Thus today's plea to South Sound residents. Yes, these are challenging times. Yes, jobs are being eliminated and salary and hiring freezes are in place. But as difficult as it is, we owe it to our friends and neighbors to be there for them during this time of need. We are called by our very humanity to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, ensure that our children are growing up happy and healthy and that our senior citizens live out their remaining days in dignity and comfort.

We are our brother's keeper, and now is the time we must step up to meet that challenge.

Survey results

United Way of Thurston County in collaboration with the Community Foundation of South Puget Sound recently surveyed 24 social service nonprofit organizations in this community about their financial health and their ability to provide services.

The results are discouraging, but not surprising:

- **23 of the 24 nonprofit directors** said demand for services is up from a year ago -- from slight increases of 5 percent to 10 percent to some organizations struggling to meet a 100 percent increase in demand for services.
- **58 percent of the nonprofit directors** said their funding has been cut. Housing programs were hardest hit, increasing the likelihood that more people -- especially men -- will be homeless.

- **Nonprofit directors have responded** by reducing financial assistance to clients, cutting their operating budgets, terminating employees, cutting hours of service, scaling back fundraising efforts and eliminating some services.
- **92 percent of the nonprofit directors** said they expect demand for services to increase in 2009 as the community, state and nation continue to struggle financially.

Tapping new sources

United Way has been pro-active in trying to deal with this crisis. As one example, they have started a Women's Leadership Council, which aims to increase the number of women in the community committed to philanthropy. The goal, according to co-chairwoman and Thurston County Auditor Kim Wyman, is to promote financial self-sufficiency among women.

Drawing newcomers into philanthropic efforts is a smart strategy -- one of many United Way strategies to increase giving.

United Way partnerships are another strategy. This year, for example, United Way has partnered with The Evergreen State College to use students in the master's programs to develop a community assessment of the health and well-being of the South Sound community. It's a valuable source of information that many nonprofit organizations use to target their services to those most in need.

The United Way/Evergreen partnership also is a great way to draw young people into the nonprofit community. President-elect Barack Obama showed the value of energized youths, and United Way officials are smart to follow that lead.

Community activism

But the United Way, as an umbrella organization, is more than a fundraising entity. While the campaign goal is \$1.4 million this year, the United Way is equally dedicated to community activism and involvement. The United Way's goal is to strengthen this community by connecting people and resources to meet identified community needs. It's all about empowerment and getting results.

That's an important point, too. As Rhodetta Seward, board president says, "The United Way does not fund organizations. We fund programs and monitor their progress."

That's one of the greatest services the United Way provides to this community. United Way is a vetting agency that takes a long, hard look at individual programs in this community and decides which programs can get the best results in three key areas: education, income and health. It measures the results and educates service providers about wasteful duplication in services.

The United Way is a strong advocate for data-based, research-based, results-based giving. In many respects, non-profit directors are equally pleased with the United Way's stamp of approval as with the dollars that flow into their agency's treasury. The fact that the program has been vetted by the United Way gives organizations added leverage with other fundraising sources.

But the truth is the United Way of Thurston County relies on individuals for 85 percent of its fundraising campaign. Business owners must open their doors to United Way volunteers who can talk to employees about the incredible work accomplished with their charitable dollars.

And those same business owners and employees need to reach a little deeper during this economic downturn — whether it's the United Way of Thurston County, the state's Combined Fund Drive, or an individual charity.

What ever you can give, where ever you can give -- just do it. Those in need are counting on your generosity.

(John Winn Miller, publisher of The Olympian, is chairman of the United Way's 2008 campaign.)