

Published October 28, 2009

More than ever, United Way deserves support THE OLYMPIAN

It's understandable that many nonprofit groups are responding to these tough economic times by cutting programs and services to align with their shrinking budgets.

But United Way of Thurston County is bucking the tide, avoiding reductions in grant support for its nonprofit partners this year and kicking off a 2009-10 campaign drive to raise \$1.4 million, which would be an 8 percent increase over last year.

The hard-working United Way staff and volunteers hold strongly to the belief that South Sound is a caring community, a community that will step up to the challenge of providing food, shelter, clothing, medical care and other services for a population in need, a population that has grown steadily since the economy started to backslide two years ago.

Statistics tell a disturbing story: 1,000 homeless people living in the woods and on the street, a 40 percent increase in Thurston County Food Bank clients in the past two years, some 115 people on the waiting list for Drexel House, a transitional housing facility in Olympia.

With every lost job, with every home foreclosure, more individuals and families find themselves unable to make ends meet. At the same time, local and state government funding for social services has been slashed and federal stimulus money could very easily dry up before the economy and employment rates recover.

So it is incumbent upon employees, employers, retirees and others who have the time and resources to lend a hand. Give to United Way so United Way can give to the charitable groups in our community that help the hungry, the homeless and the disadvantaged.

United Way officials enter the 2009 campaign drive with a few new ideas that should help them reach their goals. For instance:

- An aggressive outreach program is under way to enroll more businesses and work places in United Way campaign pledge programs. It's essential that United Way expand its partnerships, especially since many businesses that United Way has depended on for contributions over the years have pared back work forces due to the recession.
- United Way will launch next month a "Give 10" social media campaign in which computer savvy donors will be asked to give \$10, then use Twitter to encourage 10 friends to give \$10, too.
- United Way will encourage people with Facebook accounts to add United Way of Thurston County as a Facebook cause and invite friends to contribute a birthday donation for the number of years he or she is celebrating.
- The organization will make a stronger effort to connect with students, retirees, entrepreneurs, faith-based organizations and others outside traditional workplace settings.

"We realize there are groups out there that don't work in offices," noted Bill Lahmann, president of the board of the United Way of Thurston County and Olympia School District superintendent.

• United Way will offer more ways to donate other than signing workplace pledge cards, including giving online via credit card at www.unitedway-thurston.org, automatic deductions from your bank account and direct gifts of cash or checks payable to United Way of Thurston County.

Aside from helping fund some 65 local programs that meet the needs of the underprivileged, United Way is working on other ways to build a stronger community, including a 5-year, \$3 million program to improve early learning opportunities for preschoolers.

Research shows that a child's brain is almost fully developed by the time he or she enters the K-12 school system.

Improving early childhood nutrition, health and learning opportunities are not just niceties, they are necessities on the pathway to a healthy, productive life.

United Way of Thurston County understands the value of early learning and is working hard to advance the cause here in Thurston County.

Granted the 2009 United Way campaign comes at a difficult time for many potential donors. But look around — the face of need is changing. Who's to say? A neighbor, a friend or a family member is just a pink slip away from needing the helping hand that United Way of Thurston County provides.