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In support of strong women

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OLYMPIA – A new United Way of Thurston County program aims to involve women in philanthropy and improve the financial stability and literacy of South Sound women and girls.

The Women's Leadership Council has been recruiting for a year, and it is now gearing up to make its first grants to community organizations that can help women become financially independent and stable.

"We wanted the focus to be on the need in the community for women to be financially self-sufficient and stable," council co-founder Michelle Wickett said. "We're really trying to find a mix of services ... that provide for mentorship of women and girls."

Programs that receive grants could be anything from educating women on basic home economics to job and interview skills, Wickett said.

The Women's Leadership Council is a new initiative of the United Way of Thurston County as a way for women to donate their time and money to the community. The cost of membership in the Women's Leadership Council is \$1,000 annually. Membership for women under age 35 is \$500 annually, and full-time students can join for \$100.

"The focus is on women helping other women," said United Way of Thurston County Executive Director Pam Toal.

"Men have traditionally been targeted for philanthropy," said council chairwoman Veronica Bronkema. "We have been getting women who have not been involved in philanthropy before. It's been fantastic."

Seventy-five percent of the membership dues goes toward the grant program, which will be aimed at programs that can strengthen women's and girls' financial knowledge and skills.

The group chose to focus on financial empowerment for women because women in poverty can be subject to foreclosures, disadvantages in the workplace and abusive relationships.

While there are other Women's Leadership Councils organized under other local United Ways in different parts of the country, Thurston County has the first one in the state, Toal said.

"You get connected with other caring women in the community if you so choose," Toal said. "... This is a much deeper level of engagement that women definitely want, according to our research."

In its first year, the group has attracted 50 members and established \$25,000 for the Women's Leadership Council Giving Circle Fund, which is earmarked for community grants that will be decided by the council.

Events have included a "shelter shower," where members brought items to donate for Yelm Community Services, and Thursday's event, which explored local youth mentor programs.