

Panels dole out United Way cash

Local director says citizen committees make decisions

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The Hillsdale County United Way has just wrapped up its annual fund drive and has reached its goal.

But now that they have all this money, how do they decide where it should go? The United Way funds 16 local agencies and how it allocates funding is a puzzle the agency's new executive director wants to solve.

"To take the mystery out of how this is done, I think it's important to educate the public so fewer questions remain," Laurie Benzing said.

United Way made its 2008 goal Friday afternoon thanks to a last-minute donation from ACT Test Panels for \$7,100.

Now that the goal is met, four different panels will convene in March, each with the following agenda:

- Addressing urgent or emergency needs in Hillsdale County;
- Impacting people through positive change;
- Supporting families to achieve and maintain well-being and independence; and
- Preparing youth to become accountable adults.

Each panel has a chairperson, which may or may not be a board member, Benzing said.

"All have equal say and include community members, along with board members," she said. "People can volunteer to be on a panel by contacting us. Normally, there are five to six people on each panel because anything any larger makes it hard to come to a consensus."

Policy negates anyone who is a paid staff member of the 16 agencies to serve on any of the panels.

Every agency has the opportunity to offer a presentation at a panel discussion, at which time panel members ask detailed questions.

"At that point, once they've met and have done interviews, the panel looks at the amount requested and the amount designated," Benzing said, explaining that United Way has two ways of deciphering the information.

First, United Way looks at how much is designated and either takes out or adds to that amount. Benzing hopes to change the perception that only that amount will be allocated.

"There is no incentive for agencies to push United Way," she said. "We're hoping the process will change so in the future, if we're designating to an agency, it will be above and beyond — the agency will see returns."

Usually, there are more requests than money, so in this case, United Way goes to those who met requirements. This, she said, serves as a good checks and balance system.

"We're looking to find special programs to track that so we can measure their outcomes," she said. "It has to be measurable to get money from United Way."

As United Way receives money monthly, it is giving it away, she explained.

Last year, out of money that went out, \$1,000 went to Poison Control at the University of Michigan to provide services for Hillsdale County. A total of \$19,106 was designated to agencies and \$118,000 to the general fund for United Way.

Benzing said people need to understand that of the 2008 goal set, \$150,000, a portion is not seen for various reasons. One of those is that people give money to United Way, but designate to another United Way in another county because that is where they live.

Another reason why all of the goal isn't collected is because about 10 percent of it gets lost from those who either lose their jobs or are laid off.

People also give to agencies that don't apply for funding, she said.

Also, a percentage of the funding goes to nationals to keep the United Way name. This amounts to \$1,200 to nationals in exchange for marketing materials. However, 50 percent is returned in a credit to take training, something Benzing, new to United Way believes is worthwhile.

"That amount can be helpful in terms of leadership conferences held nationwide," Benzing said. "For someone like me, who is new to the system, those conferences can be very beneficial."

Another point noted is that as executive director, Benzing does not vote on how money is allocated. She may be present and can listen, but has no say where the money goes.

"That's a good thing because it doesn't strain relationships with agency leaders," Benzing said.

Among other things to consider, when people give to United Way, most don't designate to which agency they want their money to go.

"That surprised me," she said. "People should know where it's going. Only \$19,000 is designated. If more would designate, we would get a feel for what the needs are."

"A lot of United Ways do impact funding — they access the community's top needs and pick a couple of topics and those are the only ones they fund," she added. "We don't do that, but the more the community lets us know of concerns, the easier it is to transition the money."

This year, funding for special projects like Operation Backpack and Plant-A-Row will not be used.

"We will give out the funding and just keep what we need to remain operational," Benzing said.

Now that United Way reached this year's goal, Benzing remains optimistic about the future.

"Because we made the goal in a short time period, we foresee next year's campaign as being bigger and better," she said. "I believe that we have people in this community who care — that makes all the difference."

Jane Muson, who chairs the emergency needs panel, said she is pleased the goal has been met after much work on everyone's part.

"With the economy having suffered as it has, the agencies definitely need all the assistance they can get," Muson said. "Funding covers a multitude of things people desperately need."

For more information on how to serve on a panel, or to learn more about how United Way allocates funding, call Benzing at (517) 439-5050.

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