

United Way exceeds its fund goal

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — When the going gets tough, Addison County residents come through.

That could be the slogan of the United Way of Addison County's (UWAC) next annual fund drive. Come to think of it, it seems apt for any year, given how local individuals and businesses have rallied during good times and bad to help the less fortunate among us.

The latest example: In year two of a worldwide pandemic, with businesses scrambling for workers and many residents battling illness, UWAC's 2021-2022 fund drive last week reached and slightly exceeded its \$665,000 goal — with five months still left in the campaign. This success will allow UWAC to maintain current levels of financial support to its 30 member nonprofits that deliver food, clothing, shelter, counseling and other vital services to local residents in need.

And that's not all: The real prospect of a campaign "surplus" will allow UWAC to resume its pre-pandemic policy of awarding

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community impact funding in specific categories of need.

This year, the impact funding will be earmarked for programs designed to improve public health. Helena Van Voorst, executive director of UWAC, said her agency will set aside at least \$15,000 in community-impact health funding. New-to-UWAC, emerging programs, and/or organizations that are improving health outcomes in Addison County can apply for a cut of that sum, which figures to grow as new donations are added to the 2021-22 UWAC campaign.

“There couldn’t be a better time to have the community’s support to address the health needs in the county,” Van Voorst said during an interview that included Erin Reed, UWAC’s director of development & marketing.

Both Reed and Van Voorst are proud of the community they serve, noting local donors’ empathy and willingness to share resources.

It wasn’t too long ago that UWAC was falling just shy of its annual fundraising goals. Donations had ebbed for a variety of reasons, including senior donors passing away and others moving out of the area.

But UWAC sharpened its solicitation efforts and is attracting a new generation of donors to go along with mainstays. It’s done this in part by networking with young and established members of the business community, who are learning more about the community’s needs as they associate. The “Addison County 365 Business Circle” and the “Emerging Leaders of Addison County” are two relatively new groups that have joined UWAC coalition of supporters.

Additional backing has come from people who were introduced to UWAC during its “Addison County

Responds” emergency fund drive of 2020. Some folks who chipped in to help those hit particularly hard by COVID elected to continue their support through UWAC’s annual campaign.

“I think the folks who first gave to UWAC during that time have recognized the pandemic is not over, and the needs are still great,” Van Voorst said.

Reed is UWAC’s numbers guru, and she’s got encouraging figures to share about the latest fund drive. Among the heartening trends: Longstanding donors are giving more this year — in some cases, a lot more.

UWAC’s gift categories used to consist of the following levels: Annual Campaign (Under \$1,000), Leadership Campaign (\$1,000-\$1,249), Robert Frost (\$1,250 to \$9,999), and Tocqueville Campaign (more than \$10,000). The organization last year added Robert Frost Silver (\$2,500-\$4,999), Robert Frost Gold (\$5,000 to \$7,499) and Robert Frost Platinum (\$7,500 to \$9,999), to give philanthropists additional choices.

Reed said the campaign to date has gleaned 13 donations at the Tocqueville level; last year’s campaign harvested a total of 11 Tocqueville gifts.

“We’re seeing new folks come in, and existing Robert Frost donors move up into that Tocqueville category,” Reed added.

At the same time, the 2021-22 campaign has seen several donors “graduate” to higher levels of giving, across the board.

The largest campaign contribution thus far has been \$50,000. An anonymous contributor has pledged \$80,000 over four years for a separate cause (homelessness), independent of the annual campaign, according to Van Voorst.

Van Voorst acknowledged some

people were able to write bigger checks this year because of the stock market.

“The markets being what they are, we’ve heard from some donors who said they’ve had kind of a windfall as it relates to the performance of their personal investments, and they’re feeling compelled to invest that back into the community, and they’re trusting UWAC with that,” she said.

But it’s not just the big donations that make United Way officials smile. Around 500 of the 719 gifts to the 2021 campaign (thus far) have been in increments of less than \$1,000.

And around 10% of UWAC donors have chosen to give through payroll deduction plans.

Another revenue source: The United Way’s first-ever “0.5-K Race For The Rest Of Us,” held this past Oct. 10. It drew more than 50 people of all ages (and their leashed pets) who walked, danced, skipped, jumped or hoped their way to the finish line.

“Our community has really stepped up, which isn’t surprising to us,” Reed said.

July 1 will be the start of a new fiscal year, and the date on which UWAC officials will intensify planning for the 2022-23 fund drive. All the spreadsheets will go back to zero.

“A very sad day for me,” Reed said with a smile.

UWAC officials will be expressing gratitude to a lot of people during the months to come.

“We’re very thankful to the community for trusting us with their philanthropic support,” Van Voorst said. “Our donors have set us up for some success in changing some outcomes for people who live here.”

For all things UWAC, go to unitedwayaddisoncounty.org.