

United Way campaign just shy of goal

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Addison County residents and businesses are demonstrating their trademark generosity at a time when it's most needed, according to managers of the United Way of Addison County's (UWAC), whose latest annual fund drive continues to face the formidable headwind of a pandemic.

Still, even with an unprecedented demand for services by neighbors whose incomes have been decimated by COVID-19's economic fallout, UWAC is just \$77,000 short of reaching its 2020-2021 campaign goal of \$635,000. A majority of these funds will be used to support two-dozen local nonprofits that deliver food, clothing, shelter, child care, workforce training and other critical services to Addison County residents in need.

"We're tracking ahead of our past-year totals, which is really awesome," UWAC Executive Director Helena Van Voorst said on Monday.

UWAC will close the books on the campaign on June 30, so it's mounting a major drive to cap the fiscal year with good news. And to that end, three anonymous benefactors are together pledging to match, dollar-for-dollar, campaign contributions — up to a total of \$15,000 — made from April 1-15. This would put a \$30,000 dent in the balance to be raised.

Still, it won't be easy. The pandemic has put the clamps on in-person fundraising events. That meant no "Spin United," a popular spinning exercise challenge that typically yields \$7,000-\$10,000 for the campaign.

"This year, all of our donations are coming from individuals and businesses," Van Voorst said.

She noted members of the UWAC's "365 Small Business Circle" have been particularly generous.

"(The group) has grown a lot during the past year, despite of

the challenges many of our small businesses have been facing," she said.

While UWAC is primarily known for its annual campaign, it's waging the war on poverty on multiple fronts.

It's deployed \$72,308 in emergency grants to nonprofits going through COVID-related budgetary crises.

The organization has also been awarding emergency relief funds to individuals, through its relationship with the local "Housing Solutions" group. Housing Solutions is a network of local nonprofit representatives working together to secure permanent shelter for homeless people. The United Way has disbursed \$102,000 in funding through Housing Solutions.

"If we're able to meet our goal early this year and surpass it, extra funds will be used to continue those COVID-related emergency needs for individuals and nonprofits," Van Voorst said.

And Van Voorst — who also chairs the Addison County Housing Coalition — knows the need for more affordable homes is going to get much worse soon. She estimates there are 88 people — including 14 families — who are temporarily residing in Middlebury-area hotels and motels because they have nowhere else to go. Those lodgers will be returning to business as usual this summer as COVID restrictions are lifted.

Some of the hotel/motel guests may choose to leave the area, but Van Voorst suspects a majority will want to stay in Addison County.

"These folks who need a place to stay have a lot of other needs as well," Van Voorst said. "There's lots of emergency relief funding right now, which is awesome, and we're doing the best we can to take advantage of those funding opportunities, but there's some concern about what happens as we return to normal and that emergency relief funding goes away. Then the folks most impacted by COVID are



UNITED WAY OF Addison County officials are working on multiple fronts to get resources to people in need — including those directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, three anonymous donors have pledged to match, dollar for dollar, contributions made to the UWAC by April 15. Pictured, from left, are Lee Bilson, Tim O'Toole, Helena Van Voorst, Steve Wilson, Alex Larrow and Erin Reed (missing are Jesse Brooks and Jessica Hellyer).

still going to need a great deal of support ... and the relief funding won't be here forever."

Van Voorst wants to hear from area residents who might have ideas about where low-cost homes could be created.

United Way officials are trying to solve immediate problems, but they're also looking long-term. They're part of a "Reimagine Addison County" effort seeking to make the region's services and infrastructure better in a post-COVID world. Community development, broadband and upgrades to the county's child

care system are all part of the "Reimagine" paradigm.

"Reimagine Addison County will be much bigger than UWAC, but it will inform our strategic plan for the years ahead," Van Voorst said. "It will be owned across many sectors in the county. We're looking forward to bringing a lot of different people and organizations together for that effort."

Those able to make a contribution to the UWAC's campaign and varied poverty-fighting efforts should log on to unitedwayaddisoncounty.org.

Reporter John Flowers is at johnf@addisonindependent.com.