

United Way seeks \$700k in fund drive

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — For the second year in a row, the United Way of Addison County (UWAC) is seeking to raise \$700,000 to support local nonprofits that dispense food, clothing, counseling, childcare and other vital services to area residents in need of assistance.

And United Way officials have their eyes on another goal — a fifth straight year of exceeding their annual fundraising target. The philanthropic organization topped its objective for fiscal years 2020, '21, '22 and '23 — in that last year harvesting \$732,031.

With an FY'24 motto of "United in Purpose," UWAC officials will officially launch this year's campaign with its traditional "Days of Caring" on Sept. 21 and 23. On each of those days, UWAC will match scores of volunteers

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with local nonprofits that need help sprucing up their grounds, running errands, painting fences and gardening.

Erin Reed, development & marketing director for UWAC, explained the Days of Caring aren't simply a donation of labor; they also build teamwork among volunteers who see firsthand what local charitable organizations are doing.

As of this writing, around 15 county nonprofits had signed up to tap into an anticipated 200-strong volunteer base — including a bunch of Middlebury College students — ready to take on various jobs.

Reed and UWAC Executive Director Helena Van Voorst are pleased to report that growing interest in charitable work assignments has prompted UWAC to build upon its "Days of Caring." The organization has established "Days of Action," opportunities throughout the year for businesses and individuals to help local nonprofits with their chores.

Van Voorst referred to the Days of Action as "microbursts of volunteering throughout the years."

Among recent "Action" participants: Middlebury's Vermont Cider Co., which offered up some of its employees during a recent, weeklong shutdown of its bottling line. United Way connected the about 10 participating cider workers with jobs at five sites, including the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, the Little League fields in Vergennes, and at the UWAC office in Middlebury.

"It was great. They were able to learn more about what the UWAC does, and they were able to get out into the community. They were willing to roll up their sleeves and do whatever was thrown at them," Reed said.

Anyone interested in donating time to area nonprofits may log on to the UWAC's online volunteer center at tinyurl.com/mu7dyeth. Any county nonprofit can create an account on the website to convey volunteer options. Reed stressed folks should call UWAC if they don't happen to find anything on the volunteer center that matches their interest.

Along with coordinating volunteers, United Way officials will be spending a lot of time this fall and winter soliciting donations for the FY'24 fund drive. The organization will gladly receive donations through individuals, businesses (including payroll deduction plans), bequests and other modes of giving.

Last year's campaign drew gifts from 871 households (including 92 new ones). Most donations (607) were in increments of less than \$1,000, but 209 donors were able to give amounts ranging from \$1,000 to \$9,999. And 13 givers were able to write checks of \$10,000 or more, according to the UWAC's FY'23 annual report.

"Support from individual donors has been really strong for United Way, and we are building relationships with people in Addison County who are supporting our mission," Van Voorst said. "We'll continue to



HELENA VAN VOORST

lean on that."

Another important source of support for UWAC has been the "Addison County 365 Business Circle," a group of entrepreneurs, business owners and managers who have agreed to donate anywhere from \$365 (\$1/day) to \$1,460 (\$4/day) each year.

It should be noted that UWAC goes beyond extending yearly financial aid to its area nonprofits. It also aggressively applies for grants to tackle issues ranging from dismantling systemic racism to helping people recover from the impacts of natural disasters.

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She cited, as an example, UWAC's support for substance use prevention efforts. The United Way last year secured a \$240,000 federal Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking Act Grant. That award, to be spent in \$60,000 annual increments through September of 2027, will allow UWAC to

(among other things) give each of the county's three local high schools \$5,000 each (for four years) to promote substance-free events for Project Graduations and at other high-risk times for underage drinking.

The grant will also provide \$4,000 annually for the Counseling Service of Addison County's efforts to provide trauma-informed care training youth and families in need of mental health care, according to UWAC Director of Advocacy Sylvie Choiniere.

And, as previously reported by the *Independent*, United Way of Addison County has stepped up to help residents affected by flooding here in July and early August. Individuals can apply for up to \$1,500 to help cover flood-related property damage. As of last week, UWAC's flood relief resources amounted to around \$31,000, thanks largely to funds provided by the Vermont Community Foundation. UWAC had drawn 36 applicants for a total of \$53,000 as of Sept. 12.

Go to unitedwayaddisoncounty.org for information on how to apply for assistance and how to donate to UWAC's FY'24 fund drive and other initiatives.

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