

New battle plan: Agencies develop programs, alter strategy in war on poverty

By SANDY SCARMACK | Herald Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, August 26, 2015 7:45 am

HERMITAGE – After taking nearly a year to dig deep into the challenges facing both poverty-stricken families and the agencies that serve them, the United Way of Mercer County is ready to change the way it does business.

Executive Director Jim Micsky said from now on, agencies that receive money from the United Way have to prove their programs help reduce poverty in a measurable, tangible way. "What that is, we are still trying to determine. We are still in the infancy stages with this goal. But we think setting this goal is a great opportunity to make some positive changes," he said.

Integral to this new initiative, he added, is the use of 211, a nonemergency helpline that is often the first point of contact for families struggling with housing issues, utility bills, transportation troubles and other problems.

Herald Publisher Sharon Sorg, who chairs the planning committee, said nearly 10,500 families in Mercer County make less than \$20,000 and without mastering the tools of resume-building, job-searching and interviewing, it's more difficult to increase income. Also, in a presentation she made to the planning committee, she said children growing up in low-income families face a higher risk of failing in school.

Both of those are problems the United Way would like to focus on as it begins the task of reducing poverty, Micsky said. One of the first steps, he said, will be to create a database shared among all 36 agencies.

The benefit to that, he said, is that each agency can see what others have done to help a particular family and determine if they can provide additional resources. "I see it almost like a medical team. We'll have cases that we'll review and we'll discuss how we can best help the family by working together," he said.

One key piece of the goal, he said, is a financial literacy program being developed by a subcommittee within the United Way. Sorg said "financial literacy is crucial for each family to maximize the dollars they do have available.

"In conjunction with all of our local financial institutions, a committee has been created that will be teaching such courses to current clients of United Way agencies and also going into the schools to teach



Prince of Peace at work

CORY BYKNISH | HeraldCarolyn Harris, an employee at Prince of Peace, Farrell, hands clothing to volunteer Butch Wiley to hang on a rack.

children the value in savings and budgeting processes," she said.

The program is also intended as a way to monitor how sincere clients are about getting out of poverty, Micsky said.

"For people who are struggling and want to do all they can to improve their situation, we want to do everything possible to help. Unfortunately, there are also those who scam the system. With this database, we'll be able to see who is following up with the recommendations made by the agencies serving them and who is not," he said.

"If we say we believe they will benefit from taking this financial literacy course and a month later they are back looking for the same help and we see that they didn't take the class, we will have a better sense of who is truly interested in making changes and who is not. There are never enough resources to go around, so we need to be able to assure our donors that the money they give is being used to help those who want to help themselves," Micsky said.

Right now, he said, agencies are in the midst of creating a single intake form for people asking for assistance. Micsky said sharing information will save time and resources. "Rather than each single agency wasting time asking for the same basic information, this form will be a single access point."

Brad Gosser, director of Greenville-Reynolds Development Corp. who served as last year's fundraising chairman, said once he saw the "efforts, communication and trust and all the synergy" among the agencies, he became passionate about finding a way to make that teamwork more effective.

"This system will be helping people help themselves," he said.

Greenville schools Superintendent Mark Ferrera will succeed Gosser as this year's campaign chairman. "I think we need to be careful in how we allocate money. Most people have a concept of poverty but we haven't changed the way we've done business in the 60-plus years the United Way has been here," he said.