

United Way funds agencies that help people help themselves

Beyond handouts, it fights root causes of social problems

By RENEE CAREY Herald Editor

Nov 24, 2016

HERMITAGE – The United Way of Mercer County is not interested in just dispersing money to charitable organizations and agencies.

The organization's executive director Jim Micsky and its board of directors are interested in finding, and funding, agencies that have one mission: giving the people they serve the tools they need to change their lives.

So it is not budgets and good intentions, but outcomes, that they are watching.

The reason for that is simple, Micsky said. The United Way wants to focus not on perpetuating the conditions that create the need for social service organizations, but to create pathways to independence that will move recipients from need to managing their own futures with confidence.

That philosophy allows those who give to the United Way the confidence that a gift is not just money thrown at a problem, but an investment that brings the community one step closer to a solution, Micsky said.

And that goal requires determining what puts people in a position to need help with utilities, housing, food or counseling in the first place.

"We need to make sure we get to the root cause," he said. "We have to look at why we are facing the same barriers each year."

So the United Way examines not just what the organizations it funds do, but what kinds of issues they are addressing — and the results of those efforts.

At a time when money is tight for many families, accountability for any investment — even for a charitable cause — is key, said Angie Palumbo, board allocations chairwoman.

“Everybody struggles in some way,” she said. “If you are working and you have a family, you have to be careful where you spend your money. They want to see a return on their investment. What are you doing with my dollars?”

So agencies are asked to give board members and community investors more than just how many people they serve and the dollars they need. They must show that their efforts are getting people out of the circumstances that trap them in poverty — and giving them the tools they need to stay out.

Micsky says many issues make Mercer County unique, not the least of which is its rural/urban mix.

He said making sure that those who need services are able to connect with those who can provide them is critical.

That is why the United Way partnered to create PA 211 Southwest, a hotline that gives residents a central place to call.

The specially trained operators know where to direct callers because they are familiar with the resources that organizations can provide.

So if someone needs help, Micsky said, there is no need to travel from agency to agency, which can be a problem for a resident who lives in a rural area, far away from some of the most-often requested services.

“We are hitting the target,” he said. “People are getting to the right agency.”

The centralized call center also allows the United Way to track which services are most requested, allowing the organization to take that under consideration when it is allocating funds.

“We can start identifying the top needs each month and where they are located.”

Monthly and weekly reports offer insights into those needs, Micsky said.

They also enable the United Way to make sure that available resources match the need, said board chairman Mark Ferrara.

“We are trying to focus on collaboration and to reduce duplication,” Ferrara said.

Utility assistance is one of the most frequent requests for assistance, Micsky said.

And rather than just funding bill-paying assistance, Micsky said the United Way is addressing the root cause — financial literacy.

Courses are being offered across the county, giving families the tools they need to balance their budgets and to keep themselves from financial emergencies.

“This is a very common problem,” Palumbo said. “They have the money, but they are overspending.”

The financial literacy course shows attendees how to make the right decisions, she said, and how to take an active role in making their resources last through a month.

That success gives them the boost they need to take charge of their futures, she added.

Transportation and housing continue to be concerns, as is something else many people might not think about, Micsky said — housekeeping.

The United Way is launching an initiative that brings resources into homes of people who need guidance on keeping their homes clean and safe.

“People who are living in these conditions don’t always have the understanding or the role models to have taught them why it is important,” Micsky said.

Assistance is given for the initial cleanup, and then the skills for maintaining a clean home are taught and reinforced, thus creating a success that helps in many ways.

“We really see a difference,” he said.

All of the United Way efforts are focused on families of all sorts — and making lives better for people of all ages.

Those goals are particularly important with children, Ferrara said.

“It is trying to break the cycle,” he said. “Kids are used to seeing what has been in place for a long time. If we show them that there are better opportunities for success and we show there is hope and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, they will believe in themselves and a brighter future.”

Every donation to the United Way is one step closer to giving them that glimpse of the possible.

“If everyone in this county who is working — about 50,000 of us — gave a dollar a week, we would raise \$2.5 million,” Micsky said. “And 100 percent of everything we raise stays right here.”

Palumbo added that retirees like herself should participate as well.

“They forget, because they are not part of the working world anymore,” she said. “I am a big proponent for the retirees in the community giving even just a dollar a week. Think of what we could do.”

Micsky said the United Way has a speakers bureau that can come and talk to any group or business that is interested in doing a United Way campaign.

TO DONATE, contact the office at 724-981-1884 or via email at uwmc@uwmercercounty.org.