

Community Fund Turns 60: Growing and helping since 1951

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It's had quite a few names in the past 60 years, but no matter what its been called, the **Community Fund** of Darien has enjoyed enormous support from you in its effort to coordinate human services in Darien and neighboring cities. The **Community Fund** celebrates its diamond anniversary with its 2010-11 fundraising campaign. It has given more than \$20 million and now raises about \$1 million annually, compared to around \$36,000 in 1951.

Its history is marked by name changes and mergers with another Darien organization dedicated to sharing information between welfare agencies that predates the **Community Funds** centralized fundraising efforts. In 1924, agency leaders formed the "United Darien Association" to share information between their agencies.

They became the "Darien Council of Social Agencies" 23 years later and then the "**Community Council of Darien**" in 1954.

While the council was a venue for central planning and dialogue between agencies, centralized fundraising didn't start until 1951, when the Darien United **Fund** formed.

In its first year, members hoped to raise \$30,000 by collecting \$10 from every household in town. They exceeded that goal by 20% in one week with 95% of households supporting the **fund**.

In 1967 that organization and the council merged, forming the Darien United **Fund & Community Council Inc.**

Ten years later, the organization joined the United Way and became the Darien United Way and **Community Council**.

When the **Community Council** was dissolved in 2005 and became the Human Services Planning Council, the group became the Darien United Way.

In 2006, the organization withdrew from the United Way and became the **Community Fund of Darien**.

No matter the name, the advantages of collaboration have drawn Darien and area welfare agencies together since 1924 and the benefits of centralized fundraising have kept the **Community Fund** growing since 1951.

The benefit to the donor is the assurance that donations will be well spent, Bob Wells, president of the **Community Fund**, said.

The **Community Fund** researches welfare agencies effectiveness and financial viability.

"We do the homework" Wells said, so the average person doesn't have to. The **Community Fund** doesn't have a group of "pet charities" that it simply divides allocations among, Wells said. They hold the agencies to high standards and have even dropped agencies that didn't put their money to the best use.

Though "everyone is competing for the same dollars," agencies gain from pooling knowledge and communicating, Wells said. "By working together, they're all more effective." The board of directors, which Wells said have a lot of business experience, offer guidance to the agencies it supports.

If an agency's board doesn't have an appropriately sized board of directors, for example, the **Community Fund** might recommend it get more board members.

Most of the agencies welcome suggestions from the **Community Fund**, which Wells said is looked at as a model by similar organizations in other towns.

Some towns have needs assessment councils, Wells said, but that's only half the battle.

"Information is helpful," Kiki Karpen, the executive director, said, "but there has to be some next step." The **Community Fund**, though careful and methodical, isn't overburdened by bureaucracy, Wells said.

The board of directors, he said, doesn't "just go to meetings" every so often. "These are people that roll up their sleeves" and in their "heads and hearts say, lets make this a better place." If the Touch a Life **Fund** gets a tip from Social Services that someone can't pay his or her electric bill, "we pay it. No questions asked," Wells said.

"We don't do the lights on the ball fields," Wells said.

But Darien children and young adults still benefit from the **Community Fund**.

In 2009 Youth **Community Fund**, run by Darien High students was given \$5,000 to donate how it saw fit. The students ended up giving the money to support agencies that provide food and shelter.

This month, the **Community Funds** Thriving Youth initiative launched a program to post tips around town and in The Darien Times [see page 5A] about raising and interacting with children and young adults.

While other agencies have seen significant dips in fundraising, the **Community Fund** is thriving due to the support Darienites have shown the organization since its successful launch 60 years ago. jkara@dariantimes.com