

Darien, area nonprofits feel needs of a recession Christmas

Written by Lynsey Santimays

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The holiday season is characterized by a spirit of giving among people, especially to those in need. However, with the need growing and the giving slowing down, many not-for-profit organizations are feeling the burn instead of the love.

Editorial: Be a good king

Earlier in the month, the Fairfield County Community Foundation released a report on the impact of the recession on not-for-profits and the people they serve. The report's conclusion was rather straightforward — since the economic downturn two years ago, not-for-profits have seen a plunge in donations and skyrocketing need.

"There's fewer dollars all across the board, from government funding, to corporate contributions, to private philanthropy," Kiki Karpen, director of the Community Fund of Darien, said. "But there are more people knocking on the door every day. Nonprofits are being stretched very thin."

According to Susan Ross, president and CEO of the Fairfield County Community Foundation, several area not-for-profit directors reported "last year's donors are this year's clients." With Fairfield County being hit extremely hard by the recession, area not-for-profit charities are busier than ever before.

The report's findings showed that nearly 81 percent of area not-for-profits have reported decreased funding and donations. The report also showed that more than half of Fairfield County not-for-profits have experienced increased demand for services, and are now serving clients from higher-income brackets and suburban towns.

The Community Fund of Darien is one organization that is feeling this increase in demand. The Community Fund raises money for other not-for-profit organizations, and currently gives to about 27 different agencies in the area. Karpen said because those agencies have more need, the Community Fund has more need.

"They are trying to deal with more needs in the community with fewer dollars, which makes our role all the more important," Karpen said.

And while that trend of more need and less money has been happening over the past two years, it becomes amplified around Thanksgiving and Christmas. "It is all throughout the year, but there is always more need at the holiday times," Karpen said. "We are working harder because there is so much more to do."

Karpen explained how there are holiday needs in areas beyond the obvious, such as toys and gifts. "During breaks when children are off from school, they won't be receiving the subsidized lunch program that is provided for them each day, so there is more pressure on the family to provide food," she said. She also explained how people might feel more stress or anxiety during Christmas because of the pressure to provide.

Despite the added pressures during the Christmas season, Karpen said that they aren't doing much differently at the Community Fund. "We are working hard, sending more outreach into the community asking people for support," Karpen said, "but at this point, it's not much different than any other time."

Ceci Maher, executive director of Person-to-Person in Darien, has also been experiencing the effects of the economy first-hand.

"We have seen a consistent increase in service demand," Maher said. "We have seen a 58 percent increase in the need for food since the recession hit two years ago; our appointments for clothing

have been booking up to three weeks in advance as opposed to three days; and we have seen a 12 percent increase in new families."

In fact, the number of new families has risen from 1,200 in 2008 to 2,500 in 2009. "It has just been a constant increase across every service area," Maher said.

And that increase has been continuing as Christmas nears. "The holidays are tough for everybody, especially this year," Maher said. "People are feeling a tremendous amount of stress, even if they do have a job."

To help alleviate some of that stress, Person-to-Person is launching its toy handout today, giving out about 1,200 toys to 600 families.

"That is something all of our families look forward to," Maher said. "We give out a free new toy and book to every parent who comes to shop for their child, and a board game."

But, just as Karpen described, toys are not the only need during the Christmas season. "We have also seen an increase in demand for food over the holidays, so we are giving out additional food baskets," Maher said.

Financial needs are also growing during this time, as utility bills increase and people are in fear of having them turned off, or worse, being evicted. "We can always use financial assistance," Maher said. "That is how we help those people."

In order to deal with these unrelenting Christmas-time demands, Maher said that toy drives and food drives have been essential to their work. Perhaps the silver lining in this economic cloud is that people do tend to be more giving during this time of year as compared to the other months, Maher said.

"People are typically very generous during the holiday time," Maher said. "They are aware of those who have less, and the community really steps up."

Despite the support from the people, Person-to-Person has had to make some sacrifices in order to continue to help as many people as possible. Cuts have had to be made from both their scholarship and campership programs in order to keep the majority of their services.

"The board decided to cut back on both of those programs because we needed to have funds necessary to meet the emergency needs," Maher said. "While those programs are very important, we had to be more selective of the more important cases."

"We are basically doing whatever we can to stretch the dollars," she added.

Even though both Person-to-Person are successfully managing the needs of the holiday season, Maher stressed how these needs are not going away anytime soon.

"We don't anticipate that our clients will be seeing any turnaround from the recession until 2011," she said. "It is great that people step it up during the holiday season, but unfortunately, that need does not go away once the holidays are over."

"Please keep that in mind," Maher urged.

If you would like to help out either Person-to-Person or the Community Fund of Darien, contact Person-to-Person at 655-0048 and the Community Fund at 655-8775.

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