

# Reaching out to the community

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Human service groups in Norwalk and Stamford receive helping hand from Community Fund of Darien

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The Community Fund of Darien strives to make the lives of area residents better "through responsible, conscientious and strategic grantmaking, focusing on the those agencies and initiatives that offer sustainable solutions in meeting the human service needs of Darien, Norwalk and Stamford," according to one of the group's mission statements.

That paragraph may be a lot to take in, but then again, the 58-year-old organization takes a lot in -- and gives even more back -- to these communities and others through a detailed system of evaluation, problem-solving and financial disbursement.

"For almost 30 (of those 58 years) we were the United Way," said Kiki Karpen, executive director of the CFD. "Three years ago we went out on our own, and we're no longer with the United Way. We raise money with residential and business campaigns, and with corporate donations. We raise money here, and the bulk (of the money) goes to agencies that serve Stamford, Norwalk and Darien. The bulk of the money goes outside Darien."

Karpen broke that last statement down even further, noting that much of the money the non-profit group takes in goes out to this city.

"In the are of health and human services, we sent out over \$600,000 to 27 agencies this year," Karpen said. "We're giving \$198,000 to agencies in Norwalk, and another \$20,000 to organizations outside their borders that can impact Norwalk residents."

The CFD is more than a conduit for cash donations. Karpen, and vice presidents Jane Malcolm and Martha Rhein, make very sure the money goes to worthy and deserving groups.

"The panel makes a formal proposal by documents from the interested groups," Karpen said. "It's not a simple stamp of approval. We hold the groups accountable."

Those who do the reviews and make the recommendations are not paid for their time-consuming efforts, assuring a certain level of objectivity.

"Every year we recruit about 50 volunteers in Darien, and train them to do site visits of applicants," Malcolm said. "There are nine panels, who view three agencies each. They read grant applications, look at finances and what work they do, and see how they meet our criteria."

Those criteria include the group's finances, their board oversight, and its infrastructure (if

applicable).

"The panels make recommendations to our board of directors, and the panel goes through several layers before it gets to our board," Malcolm said. "It takes time. The money is spent locally, and the decisions (on worthiness) are made by volunteers."

Sending a check does not end the CFD's involvement with the donations.

"We offer strategic guidance," Karpen said. "We offer our board members to strengthen weak areas and show them how to use the money wisely."

The wide variety of Norwalk groups helped by the CFD include the George Washington Carver Center, the Family and Children's Agency, AmeriCares Free Clinic, the Child Guidance Center of Mid-Fairfield, Christian Community Action, the Domestic Violence Crisis Center, ElderHouse, NEON, Norwalk Community College, Norwalk Emergency Shelter, Norwalk Youth Symphony, PFLAG (Parents, Families, Friends of Lesbians and Gays), STAR, Norwalk Grassroots Tennis, and Shakespeare on the Sound.

Some of these groups are helped in an ongoing fashion, while others receive one-time, or emergency, grants.

"We're not trying to compete with anyone," Karpen said. "We're playing lots of roles - communications, and as a funder. This is not about us."

One of the CFD's underlying goals is to educate area residents about services available, whether it's a troubled teen, a senior citizen in need of home help, or someone experiencing domestic violence.

"A lot of what we do is educate people about what services are available," Karpen said. "We have these groups taking together. There are not many organizations that have our outreach capacity."

For more information on the organization or to make a donation, please visit [www.communityfunddarien.org](http://www.communityfunddarien.org).