

Community Fund starts finding homes for \$700K

Susan Shultz; Times Reporter

Today's charitable donation process can be daunting. You might want to donate to a worthy cause, but how do you decide on **the** cause? And how will you make sure those charities are not only legitimately run, but will spend your hard-earned money on needs rather than top-heavy overhead.

The Community Fund of Darien goes through a painstaking process of investigating charities of all kinds through a carefully selected panel of volunteers before passing on your donations. **The fund** is beginning its review process for **the** coming year.

Last year, **the Community Fund** of Darien quietly gave away more than \$600,000 in contributions to causes evaluated as worthwhile or in need, from elderly daycare, to children's services, to domestic violence and food and shelter needs. That doesn't include emergency needs outside of **the** formal funding process.

"Our focus area is Darien, Norwalk and Stamford," Kiki Karpen, **the** executive director, said, of **the** services evaluated and assisted by **the Community Fund**.

"Some service Darien, some service **the** greater **community**, some don't serve Darien at all-and that's OK. Our **community** is bigger than Darien."

In addition to raising and distributing money, **the Community Fund** also runs **the** Human Service Planning Council, which was formed specifically for needs assessment.

The council includes First Selectman Evonne Klein, Police Chief Duane Lovello, Schools Superintendent Donald Fital, as well as representatives from **the** town's Department of Social Services and Youth Commission, Person-to-Person, Liberation Programs, Child Guidance of Southern Connecticut, Family Centers, and others.

The Community Fund also responds to **community** needs with its Touch of Life **Fund**.

"Someone in town might need heating oil, books for classes, or childcare. They can tap into that **fund** for up to \$500," Karpen Following **the** flooding **the** town faced over **the** past year, Karpen said **the** Touch of Life **Fund** was able to donate up to \$1,000 for someone in town facing a flooding emergency after demonstrating financial need through social services.

The evaluation process for new allocations recently began with a large training session for **the** more than 60 volunteers who will participate.

Following that training, **the** volunteers take home **the** applications filled out by various services seeking money from **the Community Fund**.

Each group of services is evaluated by a panel of six or seven volunteers. **The** panel forwards questions to each provider after reading its application. Then **the** panel makes site visits to talk with each staff about **the** questions and possibly get a site tour.

"They get back together again, and say 'What did we learn?' They look at **the** evaluation form, and say 'Is this a good agency?'" Karpen said.

Turning down an agency isn't always a negative for that agency. Sometimes, **the Community Fund** decides against money for an agency because it is so successful.

"We say, 'You don't need us,'" she said.

After **the** evaluation process, **the** allocation panels present its agency reports to **the** allocation executive board of **the Community Fund** at **the** end of April.

The board will vote on where its money goes in May.

Karpen said **the Community Fund** is a "responsible steward" and knows it has a very strong responsibility by making sure **the** money is going where it will have **the** greatest impact on **the** "broadest of spectrums."

She said she encourages everyone to give to their favorite charity, but "give to us as well, to cover all **the** other charities that need your money."

While many Darienites may not be aware of or need every charity to which **the Community Fund** provides money, Karpen said it is likely someone they know or a family member has had a need for them.

"You may not know it exists, but you want it to be there."

The Community Fund will be allocating as much as \$700, 000 through this year's process.
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