

United Way drive swims upstream in tough economy

THE ISSUE: How will donors respond to the United Way of Hampshire County's campaign, in the face of continued economic uncertainty? And will the United Way be able to enlist new partner agencies, expanding its circle of influence?

STORY SO FAR: Officials with the Northampton-based agency set only a modest increase in their campaign goal this year — an extra \$25,000, for a total of \$1.225 million. That caution follows jobs losses in the region over the past year as well as intensifying demands on donors.

To help stimulate giving, the nonprofit organization, which provides funding to 27 community-based agencies, is working with the Mirage Group, home of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comic book franchise. Mirage put up \$25,000 in a challenge grant designed to coax out first-time donors and to match increases in overall workplace giving.

WHAT'S HAPPENING: Two months after its Sept. 17 kickoff, the United Way has completed the "pacesetter" part of its drive with relatively good news. The 14 companies that run early internal campaigns to encourage employee giving raised \$358,642, roughly 5 percent more than the amount pledged at the start of last year's effort.

The 14 "Pacesetter" companies this year are Applied Mortgage, Atkins Farms, Blair Cutting and Smith, Brockway Smith Co., Easthampton Savings Bank, Finck & Perras Insurance, Florence Savings Bank, King & Cushman Insurance, Kollmorgen Electro-Optical, Northampton Cooperative Bank, Packaging Corp. of America, Whalen Insurance, Wright Architectural Millwork and Wright Builders.

FINE PRINT: Within the ranks of Valley workplaces, many are working to increase employee participation in the drive, in part to win matching funding from the Mirage Group pledge, according to John Ebbets, CEO of the United Way of Hampshire County.

Packaging Corp. of America in Northampton, for instance, with about 130 employees, managed to return to 100 percent worker participation after missing that by 2 percentage points last year. The company rewarded employees by providing breakfast, lunch and dinner to members of different shifts.

Kollmorgen Corp. remains the drive's lead corporate giver, and number two in the overall campaign, with 85 to 90 percent employee participation. Smith College will again be responsible for this year's largest workplace contribution, followed by Kollmorgen and UMass.

VERBATIM: "We continue to feel pretty robust about the way things are shaping up," said John Ebbets, CEO of the United Way of Hampshire County. Still, he added: "It's a changing picture out there. Leaner and meaner."

WHAT'S AHEAD: United Way officials will continue to make the rounds of rallies at local companies, encouraging donors to renew past pledges or begin new ones.

Inside the United Way, the staff of 4½ employees will continue to monitor the financials of the 27 agencies that receive support.

"You want to be able to tell the community you have made a wise decision when you invested in the United Way," said Julie Cowan, a commercial lender with TD Bank who is this year's campaign co-chair with Hampshire College President Ralph Hexter. Because of limited funding, no new partner agencies will be added this year, as has been the norm; it has been more than seven years since the roster increased in size.

RESOURCES: Information on the campaign is available online at www.unitedwayhampshirecounty.org or by calling 584-3962.

— LARRY PARNASS

Issue Tracker is a Monday feature of the Gazette. To suggest issues, call Phoebe Mitchell at 585-5249 or email her at pmitchell@gazettenet.com.