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A sound investment

Leaders of the United Way of Hampshire County report that the 2009 campaign is off to a good start based on returns from the pacesetter companies — firms that agree to conduct their in-office fund drives early in the campaign.

With a goal of \$1.2 million, United Way got a boost from Florence Savings Bank, which agreed to match up to \$10,000 all donations from any first-time contributor. The concern is that the current crisis in the nation's major financial institutions will leave some potential donors uneasy about what they can pledge this year.

It is understandable, given the continued uncertainty of how the financial crisis is going to end. What's important to remember is that the investment in the United Way is a direct investment in the community, that the need is great and what's invested in United Way goes to work here.

United Way ended its 2008 drive on a high note, raising \$1.13 million for the 27 local agencies its helps support. It was, in many ways, a turn-around year for United Way in terms of leadership, rebuilding of community support and a better-defined mission. United Way cut costs, hired a new CEO from the community, John Ebbets, and rededicated itself to be a fundraising arm for survival centers, Red Cross, health and child service programs, agencies helping the elderly and others in the field helping those in need as it has for more than 80 years. Children and youth, health and safety, and eco-

nomie security and the key areas of interest for United Way going forward.

New poverty statistics for Hampshire County confirm those goals.

According to the Census Bureau figures, the poverty rate in Hampshire County increased from 11 percent in 2006 to 12.5 percent in 2007, the most recent year for which information is available. That was the largest increase in poverty that year for any county in Massachusetts. Meanwhile, the state's poverty rate held steady at 9.9 percent.

Those figures are based on income guidelines that are ridiculously low. The "working poor" is more than a phrase. It is a definition that can apply to too many of our neighbors, who are regularly receiving food at local survival centers. A recent report from the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts noted that working families in the Pioneer Valley have the lowest earnings anywhere in the state.

So why help through United Way? The annual fundraising campaign is convenient for donors and allows people to give knowing that the United Way will monitor programs and guarantee that the donations are used wisely for the benefit of the community. It is for charitable organizations serving Hampshire County — the equivalent of the buy-local campaigns. Money invested with United Way stays here, helps our neighbors and strengthens our community. That's a good return on our money.