

United Way to take aim at homelessness, transportation

■ Northern Ozaukee agency targets major county problems, works on 2013 campaign goal

By KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM

Ozaukee Press staff

United Way of Northern Ozaukee is working toward its campaign goal of \$275,000 — \$25,000 more than last year's goal — and tackling a new overall initiative of raising awareness of two major problems in the county.

They are homelessness, or rather people's struggles to avoid it, and a lack of transportation, United Way Executive Director Barbara Bates-Nelson said.

"We're transforming from an organization that's been a fundraising group to being more involved, bringing people to the table and identifying issues," she said.

In the coming years, Bates-Nelson said, United Way will become more of an activist in these areas.

But this year, it will continue in its traditional fundraising model.

The organization set its goal at \$275,000 because of the continuing need being experienced by agencies in the county, Bates-Nelson said.

"I wish we could set it higher, but realistically this is it," she said. "We're seeing double-digit increases in the needs reported by the agencies. It's very clear that, even though the economy is starting to improve, there are so many people in difficult situations who need help."

These are people whose hours have been cut, who are continuing to lose hours or who have lost their jobs, Bates-Nelson said.

It's important for United Way to continue to reach out to individuals and businesses, she said, noting that right now much of the giving is being done by a core group of about 10 companies.

"It's critical to grow our organization and to develop more relationships," Bates-Nelson said. "We have a few people who are doing a lot of giving."

"I firmly believe this is a committed, caring community and that people here want to help others."

People need to remember that it isn't just large donations that help, she added.

"Our funds are built \$25 and up," Bates-Nelson said. "Every little bit helps. It's cumulative."

"And if you can't give money, there are other opportunities to get involved. Volunteer and help that way. It's all important."

United Way's more activist future is being shaped at the behest of the national United Way, which wants its organizations to get more involved in their community, Bates-Nelson said.

The national organization has urged members to identify needs within their communities and to actively work to resolve these problems.

"They want us to take more of a leadership role in problem-solving in our communities," Bates-Nelson said.

Identifying homelessness wasn't too difficult for the local group, she said.

From 2011 to 2012, there was a 250% increase in referrals by the Cope hotlines of people who were about to lose their homes looking for rent and energy assistance as well as other types of aid, she said.

And the Greater Milwaukee Foundation funded a basic needs survey that identified transportation, access to health care, drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness as some of the major issues.

"We have a different face of homelessness here in Ozaukee County," Bates-Nelson said. "It's not the stereotype of people living on the streets. It's people living in cars, kids that have been kicked out of their parents' homes who are couch surfing."

"It's hard to put numbers to it right now. It takes a while to wrap your head around it."

A study done by United Ways in Waukesha, Washington and Ozaukee counties highlights the need, Bates-Nelson said.

It is dubbed the ALICE study, which stands for asset limited, income constrained, employed, and it represents households that earn more than the poverty level but less than the basic cost of living.

In Ozaukee County, the study showed, the parents of a family of four needs to earn \$16.60 an hour, or \$66,384 annually, to meet most basic needs — minimal housing, child care, food, transportation and health care.

A single person needs to earn \$11.18 an hour, or \$22,356 annually, the study showed.

Roughly 71% of Ozaukee County households are financially stable, the study showed, and 4% live in poverty. The ALICE group of struggling households makes up almost 22% of the county's 34,100 households.

"If we don't take care of these people, our problems are just going to become greater," Bates-Nelson said. "The first time they have a medical emergency, for example, they're in a free-fall. They have no real savings."

A coalition to deal with homelessness is forming in Ozaukee County, she said.

Next year, United Way of Northern Ozaukee will likely set aside funds to help tackle this problem in keeping with its new role.

But this year, it will continue to fund other agencies and expand its reach into the community, Bates-Nelson said.

The agencies funded through United Way of Northern Ozaukee include Advocates of Ozaukee, American Red Cross, Balance, Bay Lakes Council of the Boy Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ozaukee, Cope Services, Family Sharing of Ozaukee, Girl Scouts of Manitou Council, Interfaith Caregivers of Ozaukee County, Starting Point, Ozaukee County Circle of Friends, Ozaukee County Jail Literacy Program, Ozaukee Family Services, Portal Industries, Salvation Army and the Volunteer Center of Ozaukee County.