

# United Way donors demand accountability

BY LAWRENCE GREENSPON, OTTAWA CITIZEN JUNE 29, 2011 7:38 AM

Stuart Jones suggests in a recent letter to the Citizen that the United Way has "moved far from its roots" as a sort of co-operative of "member agencies." In a word: nonsense.

For decades, a volunteer board of directors and volunteer review panels set goals and community priorities for the United Way. This process became more focused 10 years ago, which was about the last time any agency received funding solely because it had been a member agency.

Donors used to value an organization that collected funds on behalf of a group of agencies that provided service to the community. But that changed.

Donors are increasingly and understandably looking for a clear line of sight to the impact of their contributions. They demand greater accountability and evidence of the difference that their contribution will make.

More than 120 volunteers from the entire city - its community leaders, front-line workers, volunteers, donors, experts and representatives from various levels of government - researched, studied and analyzed input and arrived at a renewed set of specific priority goals, which United Way launched more than a year ago. These goals include increasing the percentage of seniors living in their own homes with supports in Ottawa from 88 per cent to 92 per cent (the national average) by 2015. Similar priority goals were set in the areas of serving the disabled, new Canadians and immigrants, children and youth, families, and individuals in crisis.

The agencies themselves participated in this process of determining where United Way funding would best be invested.

United Way's open call for proposals from "old" and "new" agencies resulted in 232 proposals, and demonstrates that United Way is no longer a closed shop. United Way is open to opportunities for partnership and funding to any agency that can demonstrate its ability to address the priority goals and make measurable progress toward achieving them.

Many of the agencies use our campaign to promote themselves, recognizing that donors are open to choose to give to charities they are close to through the United Way campaign. This process is called designation and involves more than 1,000 workplaces.

This results in \$13 million (more than one-third of the \$34 million raised in the campaign) being "designated" to more than 4,000 registered charities.

David Burton, in another letter in Friday's Citizen, questions our transparency in what he mistakenly calls "internal" spending.

The costs of fundraising continues to run at 15 per cent of funds, among the lowest rates in the charitable sector.

Beyond funding agency programs, United Way also invests in community-wide initiatives and partnerships.

Project S.T.E.P. (support treatment education and prevention) is one example. After 20 years of community effort to obtain a residential drug treatment centre for youth, United Way became involved and, under the leadership of Police Chief Vern White, succeeded in organizing a capital campaign such that one treatment centre for anglophone youth is now open and another centre for francophone youth will open shortly.

Resources dedicated to making this change in our community happen can hardly be called "internal spending." "Success By 6" and "Hire Immigrants Ottawa" are similar immensely successful co-operative ventures in which United Way is significantly involved as a convener, animator and resource provider.

United Way is fully accountable and transparent for these dollars and the resulting benefits to the community. The volunteer board of directors approves and oversees all such spending.

Over the last five years, these initiatives have attracted close to \$25 million to our community and its needs. They too are designed to address the priority goals in the community and complement, not compete with, the work of funded agencies.

The huge agency response to United Way's open, competitive call for proposals highlighted the breadth and extent of the need for services and programs for people in our city.

We are committed to investing donor dollars and the community's resources where they are needed most and where they will have the greatest impact.

- Lawrence Greenspon is chair of the Community Services Cabinet of United Way.

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