

November 29, 2009

Ailing economy hurts charities

By *SHRUTI MATHUR DESAI*
Courier-Post Staff

It seems obvious that when the economy is down, giving goes down.

However, nationally, donations have gone down only about 2.2 percent, according to the National Philanthropic Trust, a nonprofit based just outside Philadelphia that manages and advises donor organizations.

"People are still giving heartily," said Eileen R. Heisman, president and CEO of the organization, who also teaches philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania. "And we don't think it will go down any further."

But in South Jersey, the impact of the downward economy is being felt, said Jere Hoffner, executive director at United Way Gloucester County. Hoffner said he has seen a "dramatic" impact on charities.

"Many agencies that have provided help with individuals are overwhelmed with requests and are running out or have run out of resources," Hoffner said.

Hoffner said he has heard some organizations that are facing a 20 percent reduction in fundraising and are reducing the numbers of families they assist.

The Cherry Hill Food and Outreach said it is taking care only of clients it already has and is not accepting new clients, said John Wright, a volunteer with the organization. The group was able to make it through Thanksgiving, thanks to turkeys provided by the state, but it recently had to cut back the frequency of food visits. Families used to come every two weeks but are now allowed to come only every 28 days.

According to the Food Bank of South Jersey, there are 101,000 people in South Jersey that are at risk of going hungry; 36,000 are children under the age of 17 and 60,000 are working adults, often in a single-income household or a double-income household working at minimum wage. The latter often make too much to qualify for government assistance, but don't make enough to make ends meet, said Val Traore, the group's CEO.

Often, families that used to give are the ones who are now coming in for services.

Traore recalled a woman from Haddon Heights who had donated for years to the Food Bank but two weeks ago wrote a letter saying she lost her job, her husband was disabled and she could not donate because she was down to her last \$30.

Traore invited her in and sent her home with a month's supply of groceries.

"This is not people being frivolous with their money," Traore said. "These are people who've had curveballs thrown at them."

The food bank had distributed 4.8 million pounds of food during 2008. As of the end of October this year, it has distributed 6.1 million pounds of food. It is predicting a 45 percent increase by the end of the year, Traore said.

"We have the same people coming in more often and we are getting a new crop of people, like the recently unemployed," Traore said.

Mark Boyd, president and CEO of the Goodwill of Southern New Jersey and Philadelphia, said he has had to change how his charity seeks donors.

"The typical donor may be getting squeezed, so we need to find more people to donate," Boyd said.

Goodwill has seen a 3 percent to 5 percent drop in donations and, in response, has expanded the number of sites where people can drop donations.

Hoffner said he didn't want to speculate on his organization's capital campaign because numbers are not expected until January, but he does predict that things will be slow.

"The thing that I am the most concerned about is we don't know whether we've seen the worst or whether we're just beginning to see it," Hoffner said. "It's that additional uncertainty that is confounding."

Some charities also feel the competition for dollars with other charities as giving decreases.

Bill Harkins, coordinator for Gloucester County's Toys for Tots, which is facing its own crunch this year, said he understands when people carefully budget their charity dollars and send it to groups like the food bank.

"You can't eat a Barbie doll," Harkins said.

But he said it's not just the basic necessities that need to be looked out for during the holidays.

"We don't want to see a child wake up Christmas morning without a smile," said Harkins, a former Marine who served in Vietnam.

Last year, the group was down about 6,000 toys, but it is still looking to increase its goal this year to 47,000 toys because, though the campaign has not yet started, he has already been inundated with requests from families looking to put gifts underneath the tree.

The Salvation Army set out its signature red kettles last week, but mail solicitations sent out in early November are down about 10 to 15 percent, said Maj. Paul Cain of the Camden County Salvation Army, which also serves Burlington and Gloucester counties.

Half of the organization's holiday funds come from the kettles, where shoppers can drop their change on the way out of a store.

Cain said the group is trying to raise \$140,000 this year, up from its goal last year of \$120,000. The increase is due to receiving twice as many requests for food bags and other help this holiday season. The group fell short of its 2008 goal, Cain said, by about \$2,000.

Big Brothers and Big Sister, which is usually associated more with volunteerism and less with fundraising, said it has taken some hits, said CEO Rob Jakubowski.

The group merged its Burlington operations with Camden and Gloucester counties a year and a half ago and that has helped keep it afloat, Jakubowski said.

"Many believe if we had not merged, our losses could've closed either agency," he said.

But not all charities are feeling the pinch.

Organizations that rely on annual donors from wealthy individuals are still giving at a higher pace, said Heisman.

"Think more of middle-income America, those who lost jobs but consistently give to charity. They're probably narrowing the numbers they give to and the gifts may be small," Heisman said.

Traore, of the Food Bank of South Jersey, said because food is such a basic need and the food bank is such a large organization, people still feel the need to donate. "We are the largest food bank in the four counties we service," Traore said. "I think people look at us as the place to go when you talk about hunger in South Jersey."

Some families are looking to stretch their Christmas dollar by spending it at Goodwill's retail stores. But while the number of sales have increased 10 percent, the dollars spent are down 10 percent, Boyd said.

"More people are coming in, but they are spending less money," he said.

Goodwill uses its retail operation to provide job experience to low-skilled workers and the sales fund its employment services, including those for people with disabilities and other disadvantages.

All of the charities said that people should not feel embarrassed if they gave at higher levels other years; every single dollar helps.

"When people say they only have a few dollars to give, well, there are about 1.1 million people in South Jersey," said Traore. "If everyone gave \$1, I could bring in so much food into this warehouse that we could meet most of the needs of the people here in an emergency situation."

Reach Shruti Mathur Desai at (856) 317-7828 or smathur@camden.gannett.com

Additional Facts

MORE INFORMATION

In need of help or looking to donate? Here's how to contact local organizations:

Salvation Army of Camden County, which serves Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties: (856) 338-1700. To schedule a pick-up or find drop-off locations, call (800) SA-TRUCK or visit www.salvationarmyusa.org.

Toys for Tots: To make a request, visit www.toysfortots.org/request_toys.

Goodwill Industries of New Jersey and Philadelphia: Call (856) 439-0200 or visit www.goodwillnj.org.

Food Bank of South Jersey: Call (856) 662-4884 or visit www.foodbanksj.org.
