

# The United -- and American -- Way

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The idea of helping those in need is not an exclusively American phenomenon and it would be extremely myopic to make such a claim. Yet it is true that this nation, to a larger degree than others, has a tradition of making charitable donations, of coming to the aid of neighbors in difficult circumstances, of participating in community service especially when the need is clear.

That's why it may seem odd that the United Way has chosen to honor the memory of a French nobleman when it established a society for major donors. Yet a closer look at the work of Alexis Charles-Henri de Tocqueville reveals the answer. This Frenchman, who came to America in 1831 originally to study its prison system, found and wrote about much more. Among his observations on American life was this: "I must say that I have seen Americans make a great deal of real sacrifices to the public welfare; and have noticed a hundred instances in which they hardly ever failed to lend a faithful support to one another."

## Campaign kickoffs

All this comes to mind as the United Way organizations across the nation and closer to home -- including the United Way of Manatee County, Sarasota County, South Sarasota County and Charlotte County -- kicked off their annual campaigns. I serve on the board of the Charlotte County organization, so I speak from a somewhat biased position, but I do unabashedly because I have seen the vast Way-funded programs.

Admittedly, there are lots of very worthy groups and very dedicated people who support individual causes, but the thing I've liked about the United Way concept is that it evaluates and prioritizes the needs in each individual community and distributes the money raised accordingly to help local people.

Aristotle said, "To give away money is an easy matter and in any man's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large, and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in every man's power nor an easy matter." The United Way strives to solve that problem.

Groups seeking United Way funding must meet certain requirements that help assure good stewardship of donor dollars. I've heard the United Way equated to a mutual fund

and, as I see it, there are two similarities. First, the benefit is spread over a number of good causes, thus helping a greater number of people; and second, the United Way does the research to help assure funds are allocated to those most worthy and deserving. In short, a donor gets more bang for the buck.

In these challenging times, it is interesting to note that charitable giving has not suffered nearly as much as had been feared. According to the National Philanthropic Trust, charitable giving in the United States declined only 2 percent in 2008 from a record high of \$314 billion in 2007.

The tough part is that needs grew at a much faster rate. The United Way of South Sarasota County reported at its kickoff Sept. 17 that the total number of families served in the greater Venice, Englewood and North Port communities increased 38 percent this past year over the previous one.

Still, people are rallying to the cause of neighbors in need. The United Way has long depended on the success of workplace campaigns in which employees agree to make donations, usually through payroll deductions.

One of the area's most ardent supporters of the United Way has been Publix Super Markets, where giving is a part of the corporate culture. It has long amazed me to hear how Publix employees, most of whom earn modest paychecks, choose to make significant donations. It is likely that the person who rang up your groceries on your last visit is giving \$500 or more annually to the United Way.

Everyone can help

The truth is that nearly everyone can afford to make a donation. A study by the leadership forum, Independent Sector, in 2001 found that 89 percent of American households make charitable contributions. That is an amazing figure, considering that the U.S. Census Bureau reported in September that 13.2 percent of Americans live below the poverty line.

So whether the donation reaches the level of the Tocqueville Society's \$10,000 or is much more modest, it is the spirit of giving that has characterized American culture since the beginning and will be needed to sustain it through challenging times.

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