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Searching for givers when the need is great

For non profit organizations, lean times often mean more demands - a situation that comes with special challenges in finding donors .

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News-Leader

The recession has caused nearly everyone to tighten their purse strings, including nonprofit charities.

Some local non profits talk about how their fund raising efforts have changed with the changing economic realities.

Supporters of specific charities can expect to be treated with special esteem, and most of us will be getting fewer envelopes in our mailboxes, but the needs continue, and donors are more important than ever.

Quantifying need

For Ozarks Food Harvest, a food bank that serves more than 340 agencies, including food pantries and feeding sites, in 29 neighboring counties, as the economy goes down, need goes up.

"Addressing the increased need ... it changes the way we talk to funders," said Bart Brown, executive director of the food bank.

The agency is developing a three-year strategic plan that includes specific numbers in each county it serves, using a map of the service area that is color coded -- red for high need, yellow for rising need and green for need being met.

"It's hard to measure hunger relief," said Brown. "But that gives us a kind of road map."

By putting the facts and the goals in a quantifiable manner that is easy to understand, donors can see exactly how many people can be fed with their gift, he explained.

Of course, numbers aren't the only goal for the food bank. It is about feeding individual people, so handwritten cards from clients are shared with donors.

"People really give to other people," Brown explained. "I think they give with their hearts, but in times like these, they want to know that they're helping the most people they can with their money."

The personal stories and the hard statistics combine to demonstrate that "there is urgency behind these goals," Brown said. He wants the public to know the food bank is serious about meeting its goals.

New strategies

When the Council of Churches of the Ozarks began strategizing for the 2009 fund raising year, the staff and board knew "the economy was facing difficult times," said the Rev. Mark Struckhoff, interim executive director.

Although 2008 ended as the best fundraising year ever, by June of this year things changed. "For the first time, we had negative numbers to report," he said.

One strategy change has been an attempt to be frugal, even in fundraising.

That led to the elimination of an annual golf tournament that generally netted about \$35,000. Instead, the main tournament sponsors were asked to participate in a fundraising challenge. The sponsors put up \$40,000 to match donations.

To raise those matching funds, the council turned to its donor base and to lapsed donors instead of looking for new donors.

"In the world of development it is pretty well accepted that it costs about \$1.50 to raise \$1 from a new donor," Struckhoff explained. It only costs about 25 cents to raise \$1 from a lapsed or current donor. So, you should spend more time and resources on taking care of who you have."

One way the council is doing that is with regular personal communication, but postage can be expensive, so the council is using more free methods, such as e-news and an upcoming interactive Web site.

An annual donor appreciation event will continue, Struckhoff said. This year, the Oct. 18 event will include a celebration of the council's 40th anniversary.

"We're really pulling out all the stops for this big party," he said. "It's all about saying thank you to our donors and thanking God for working through people to help people."

changing focus

Rainbow Network serves people in rural Nicaragua, where the poor have been victim to a struggling economy for years. The global economic downturn has impacted Rainbow both in Nicaragua and the United States.

Ryan Owen, director of development and communications, said the agency -- a Christian ministry headquartered in Springfield -- has had to cut budgets in both countries.

"We've cut programming in Nicaragua," he said. "Fewer kids are getting meals. We're only doing one housing project at a time. ... When a scholarship student drops out (of high school) ... we're not replacing them with another eligible child."

Fundraising efforts at the Springfield office have become leaner -- switching from snail mail to electronic mail and blogs, making personal visits.

"In some ways, we're doing more, but in low-cost or no-cost ways," said Owen. "I've been making lots of trips to local churches to talk to Sunday school classes. ... That doesn't cost anything but time, and I'm willing to give that time."

Getting the word out about the need in Nicaragua and the work of Rainbow Network is still important, but the focus has changed to those who already know that story.

"We're really focusing on our core supporters, people who know who we are and supported us in the past," he said. "We've spent less money and time focusing on new donors."

An annual Gracias! luncheon in the fall will go on as usual, but is likely to be less lavish than in the past. Donations of food may be harder to get, he said.

Owen emphasized that those existing donors have continued support even as the economy has plunged.

"We've been very fortunate," he said. "It would appear our donor base is pretty committed."
