

## COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

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# United Way sees dramatic drop in fundraising

By LINDSAY TOLER

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COLUMBIA — When United Way’s mid-Missouri chapter kicked off its annual fund drive in September, donations nearly hit record-breaking levels.

In just one month, United Way raised almost \$930,000 of its roughly \$3 million goal for the fall.

“We were really excited,” said Lindsey Schroeder, marketing and special events manager for Heart of Missouri United Way. “That was more than they’ve ever been able to raise before.

“But it didn’t continue that fast.”

October delivered the credit crunch, economic backsliding and \$700 billion bailouts. As companies and households shuffled their budgets, contributions to United Way fell precipitously.

“There was a week when the whole world was pummeled with devastating economic news,” said Connie Benton Wolfe, executive director for Heart of Missouri United Way.

“We didn’t know at the very beginning, but we grasped as the days went by that this is not a short-term thing. We knew things would begin to shift.”

By the beginning of November — the month that should have completed the fundraising drive — United Way predicted a 10 percent shortfall.

To make up the difference, this week the United Way in mid-Missouri launched Live United Week, a community-driven effort to get smaller donations. The effort will include an online auction, T-shirt sales and other events sponsored by local businesses and organizations.

Battling increased need

United Way serves as an umbrella organization for 31 charitable groups in mid-Missouri, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America Inc., the American Red Cross, Meals on Wheels and OATS Inc., most of which are seeing an increased need as the economy stalls.

“More people need meals,” said Marcia Walker, director of Meals on Wheels, which delivers meals to the homes of elderly or disabled people. “That has been a direct effect of the economy.”

Donations to Meals on Wheels have risen slightly but are not enough to cover the increase in clients or in food costs, Walker said. Food prices have gone up about 5 percent this year and are expected to jump another 5 percent next year, while the cost of food usually increases 2 percent to 3 percent per year, she said.

Because of rising food costs and increased need, the group is predicting a \$20,000 budget deficit next year.

Clients pay on a sliding scale for the services provided by programs such as Meals on Wheels and OATS Inc. Recently, they haven’t been able to give as much for their meals and rides, “and that, I’m sure, is directly related to the economy,” said Jack Heusted, regional director for OATS Inc.

OATS Inc. is facing an unusual situation. As gas prices fall along with the stock market, it’s actually cheaper for the group to drive clients around town.

“We were getting close to making schedule changes when fuel prices were around \$4,” Heusted said.

Before the credit crisis, the number of people asking for rides to work increased 20 percent, according to a United Way study. Now that gas prices are closer to \$2, Heusted said, “we’ve caught our breath.”

Since the economic crisis hit, clients have been more likely to ask for rides to the unemployment office than to the workplace, he said.

“You hear a lot about the auto industry and Wall Street and people losing their homes,” Heusted said, “but in reality, the average Joe at all levels is being impacted by this. A lot of people are losing their jobs.”

Heusted also said he had noticed clients becoming more frugal.

“We’re still taking them to the grocery store, but they’re just buying the basics,” he said. “People have a lot less disposable income. You’re spending more and getting less.”

It’s what Peggy Kirkpatrick, executive director for the Central Missouri Food Bank, calls “situational poverty,” when tough economic times mean paychecks can run out before the bills do.

Kirkpatrick says the food bank has seen the effects of job loss, too. Last month, food was distributed to about 9,500 people, up from 7,400 at the beginning of the year.

And while the current economy compounds the situational poverty families have been experiencing since October, she said, “we’ve been seeing it all year.”

### Playing catch up

When the University of Missouri System came up \$40,000 short of a systemwide \$600,000 donation goal, University staff opened a weeklong online auction Wednesday as a final push to help the community, said auction organizer Mitzi Clayton.

Auction items include dinners with President Gary Forsee, Chancellor Brady Deaton and MU football coach Gary Pinkel, as well as signed memorabilia from Carl Edwards. By the end of the first night, the auction had raised \$2,000 in bids.

“One in three university employees receive United Way services,” Clayton said. “We don’t want to have to tell people no, and unfortunately, people are having to be turned away.”

Companies such as Schnucks grocery store and MBS Textbook Exchange are holding “Jeans Days,” where employees donate \$5 to dress informally for work. Other groups, such as the MU Bookstore and the Boy Scouts of America, are selling Live United T-shirts this week.

United Way chapters across the country have launched similar campaigns.

“We are not alone as the only community having to put forth extra effort,” Benton Wolfe said. “It’s a difficult time.”

So far, very few T-shirts have been sold, but Schnucks General Manager Bill Chrisco said he’s staying optimistic.

“The community in Columbia, they help when there is a need,” he said. “I think bringing awareness will bring help to the United Way.”

If United Way falls significantly short of its about \$3 million goal, the group will have to seriously reconsider how to distribute funds to the agencies it supports.

So far, organizations that supply basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter — what Benton Wolfe called “I-need-this-to-live stuff” — are seen as priorities and are also receiving the biggest increase in demand, which may mean they will see fewer cuts in funding.

“But we’re not ready to go there yet,” Benton Wolfe said. “We’re still campaigning. And I think Columbia is doing probably one of the best jobs possible to really bring home the campaign.”