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Campaign faces conundrum over workplace giving

By **Daily Hampshire Gazette**

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THE ISSUE: As it begins a new campaign, the United Way of Hampshire County confronts the fact of layoffs in the region. Workplace giving is an important part of the drive to raise over \$1 million for the network of agencies that help Valley residents deal with issues of health, safety and poverty. How will the United Way adjust to a decline in workplace giving?

STORY SO FAR: Of the \$1.2 million raised in last year's campaign, \$536,966 came from donations allotted to the United Way through workplace giving, in which employees donate money with each pay period or in a lump sum. That giving represents roughly 45 percent of the entire drive - and remains essential to the campaign. However, workplace giving has been falling off, even before the start of the national recession in December 2007.

John E. Ebbets, the chief executive officer of the local United Way, estimates that in the last five years, \$100,000 in donations from workplaces has been lost.

While effort still goes in to cultivate such giving, including the use of United Way volunteers within large workplaces like local colleges, Ebbets said that source can no longer be taken for granted.

"There's been a big change in the workplace," he said. "Big companies have downsized or disappeared from the landscape. There's not a new 500-employee company opening to replace it." Among companies no longer around to participate in the United Way campaign, he noted, are Pro Brush in Northampton and Kellogg Brush in Easthampton.

WHAT'S HAPPENING: The United Way is using part of a \$25,000 pledge from Mirage Studios, the outfit that oversees marketing of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, to attract new workplace giving. Some of the money will be allocated to spur increased giving on the job.

Another share will be used as an incentive to attract more first-time giving. Mirage's gift is a match in itself - to the number of years - 25 - that have passed since Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird created a comic book about young turtles with martial arts savvy.

WHAT'S AHEAD: To figure out a strategy to sustain its work on behalf of the 27 partner agencies that receive support, the United Way will work with consultant Matt Blumenfeld of

the Financial Development Agency Inc. in Amherst.

Blumenfeld is expected to coach a United Way board committee on ways to rebuild its vital workplace giving program. "It's a unique strength that the United Way has, that no one else can replicate," Blumenfeld told Issue Tracker.

The issues: One is reaching small "new economy" businesses that don't have a corporate culture of workplace giving.

Another is using resources wisely, so a hunt for new donors doesn't end up costing more than new gifts bring in. A third is embracing social networking media like Facebook and Twitter.

Blumenfeld has completed a donor survey that told the United Way its constituents prefer that the organization retain its "community chest" function of providing help to a broad range of agencies, at a time, nationally, when many United Way programs are targeting specific social problems.

The local campaign is widely respected, Blumenfeld said, with good brand loyalty. "It's not broken. It's already doing really well. ... We can make the United Way stronger - and raise more money so it can be delivered to more people."

RESOURCES: Information on the campaign, including ways to give and to get involved, is available at www.unitedwayhampshirecounty.org [1].

- LARRY PARNASS

Issue Tracker is a Monday feature of the Gazette. To suggest issues, call Phoebe Mitchell at 585-5249 or email her at pmitchell@gazettenet.com [2].

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