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United Way nears goal of \$1.225M

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NORTHAMPTON — With a month to go, the United Way of Hampshire County is on the brink of meeting its annual fundraising goal of \$1.225 million — money that will help fund the work of more than two dozen health and human service agencies in the area.

The nonprofit group is seeking an additional \$10,000 to close the gap by June 30, a figure that will allow the organization to provide a 2 percent increase in grants for programs that serve children and youth and support the health, safety and economic security of some of the region's neediest people.

"We're obviously always trying to move the needle forward a little bit," United Way CEO John Ebbets said Tuesday. "To be this close, we think we'll be able to push it over the top."

Given the recession, the United Way's annual campaign goal was set only slightly higher than the \$1.2 million the agency raised last year, according to Ebbets.

United Way nears campaign goal

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But he noted that a combination of factors, from sound fundraising practices that rebuilt people's faith in the United Way to some of the agency's largest donors upping their contributions this year, allowed it to exceed the amount of money it raises for programs.

"What we learned in this year of great national turmoil is what many of you already know — we live in a truly special community inhabited by a great number of people willing to put up both their money and their time during a time of need," Ebbets told a recent United Way gathering.

One big boost the United Way received this year was a \$25,000 challenge grant from Mirage Studios of Northampton, whose founders, Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman, created the Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles. Mirage matched any first-time donations to the United Way, along with increased workplace donations by previous givers, up to \$25,000.

The promotion was called the "TMNT25 challenge." It generated an additional \$37,000 in donations, Ebbets said.

Even bigger was the annual contribution of the college pro-

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gram, which typically raises about 30 percent of the United Way's annual campaign contributions from the area's institutions of higher education. That effort was spearheaded by co-chair Ralph Hexter of Hampshire College, who noted the area's colleges and university "will continue to do our part."

The money raised by more than 100 United Way volunteers this year will be allocated to agencies and programs beginning in July. They include an advocacy program for abused children in the courts, youth summer camp opportunities and the mentoring program at Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Other programs the United Way supports include Safe Passage, which provides services for women and children subjected to domestic violence; the American Red Cross and the Open Door Club in Florence, a program of

the Behavioral Health Network.

The Northampton and Amherst Survival centers, Easthampton Community Center, ServiceNet's Grove Street Inn and Casa Latina are among other nonprofit groups that rely on funding from the United Way each year.

These agencies provide the area's most vulnerable children and families with life's basic needs, such as food and shelter. The United Way also administers its own federally funded Emergency Food and Shelter Program, as well as programs like First Call for Help, the 2-1-1 information service, and Success by 6 initiative, a relatively new United Way program in Easthampton that serves children age 6 and under with behavioral problems.

Ebbets said the success of this year's LIVE UNITED 2010 campaign is rooted in the concept of collective giving.

As he put it, "Thousands of individual donations banded together to have a significant impact on the lives of those in our community."

To learn more about the United Way, contact John Ebbets, CEO, at 584-3962 or visit its website at www.unitedwayhamphshirecounty.org.