

United Way picks James Ayres to head fundraising agency

By JAMES F. LOWE
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — Building on relationships he has already cultivated with area social services, James R. Ayres says he's perfectly positioned to lead the United Way of Hampshire County.

The fundraising organization helps support more than 30 community programs aimed at children, economic security and health and safety.

Ayres, 41, of Haydenville, has been executive director of the Center for New Americans since 1999, guiding efforts to help immigrants and refugees

adjust to life in western Massachusetts and become economically self-sufficient.

"Having done that work locally for so long, I have a lot of relationships in place," Ayres said in an interview. "I'm already up to speed."

The United Way of Hampshire County's board of directors voted unanimously Wednesday to appoint Ayres to succeed John Ebbets, who stepped down as executive director in July to take a job with the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Former Northampton city councilor Marilyn Richards will continue as in-

terim director until Ayres takes over in October.

As chief, Ayres will be charged with maintaining and expanding the United Way's donor base.

Last year's United Way fundraising campaign brought in \$1.225 million, which it passed on to groups such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Pioneer Valley Red Cross and the Amherst Survival Center. The Center for New Americans became a beneficiary this year. Most contributions come from employees through their workplaces.

Ayres will also oversee a study meant



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

JAMES AYRES

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to better identify community needs and resources. He said given the sluggish economy nationally, local people's needs for food, shelter and other supports are "as acute as ever."

The area's demographics are changing, albeit slowly, and warrant a closer look as the United Way sets priorities, Ayres said. "Hampshire County is experiencing slight population loss, but the groups that are growing are in large part immigrant and refugee populations," he said.

United Way board member and search committee chairwoman Christine Shirtcliff said there was a large pool of applicants for the executive director job after it was posted in June.

"Jim rose to the top of our list because of how his unique set of skills and experience best matched (the board's) top criteria for its next executive leader," she said. "Everyone was impressed with the solid management and leadership nuts and bolts of Jim's resume."

Although he doesn't take office for another month and a half, Ayres is already getting involved. He will attend the United Way's Live United 365 fundraising campaign kickoff and annual meeting 4:30 p.m. Sept. 15 at the Courtyard Marriott in Hadley.

Founded in 1992, the Center for New Americans has offices in the James House in Northampton, the Bangs Community Center in Amherst and Greenfield's Community Youth Center. It provides up to 500 people from

55 countries every year with services like English language training and job counseling.

Ayres said he has been in human services for 18 years, working as a school outreach coordinator in Springfield and project director for the Hampshire Community Action Commission before joining the Center for New Americans.

The Center for New Americans is beginning to look for a new executive director, said Ed Weisman, chairman of the agency's board of directors. Weisman said Ayres leaves the center in good shape and well-positioned to grow.

"Our mission and that of the United Way go hand in hand, and this change can only strengthen our ongoing collaboration," Weisman said.