



Helping the Newly Poor and Others

The United Way of the Columbia-Willamette sharpens its aim, offering efficient aid to traditional social services - and emergency efforts

They are called the “suddenly poor,” and hardly any of us are immune to what afflicts them: the economy. They are the folks whose jobs folded up on them after years of employment, whose insurance coverage was tied to their job and whose lives were overturned. Just like that.

Just months before, some of them organized the canned-food drives at church and bought the charity food bags that the supermarket would set aside for food banks. Now they are among the recipients. Most of the rest of us may be a paycheck or two away but really not that far from the growing ranks of Oregonians who’ve been laid off or whose own businesses have closed in the recession.

In the past six months, for example, agencies such as 211info – which refers callers to places for food, shelter and other services, including, increasingly, counseling for those in suddenly reduced circumstances – have seen a marked increase in business.

“We do a fair amount of just letting people say their stories,” says Deborah Willoughby, an information and referral specialist at 211info. “And what they say a lot is, ‘I never would have believed I’d be in this position.’ “

The free referral agency (dial 211 or visit the Web site at www.211info.org) has seen a 25 percent increase in calls from July 2008 to the end of June 2009, with food and hunger issues increasingly being the precipitating reason for the call, but often not the only one.

Other direct-service agencies report similar or greater increases.

In February, the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette launched an unusual initiative in the midst of its annual fund drive to raise extra money for relief agencies that had been hard-pressed by recession-related requests for aid.

This Community Relief Fund raised \$1.8 million for community action agencies and food banks, enough to put a bit of a dent in the problem. This was in addition to \$19.4 million that the United Way campaign raised for its member agencies that provide social services and relief on a wide variety of fronts.

In the recently launched 2009-10 campaign, United Way aims at holding its own, generally, in the face of the hard times, says Marc R. Levy, president and CEO. That means that United Way of the Columbia-Willamette aims to raise in the \$19 million to \$20 million range overall during this year's fund drive, which ends in the spring. The emergency services initiative itself will be folded into the main campaign in the hope of raising \$2 million just for that category, to be distributed mainly to emergency food organizations and the established community action agencies in Clackamas, Multnomah, Washington and Clark counties.

Recent news reports have suggested that the velocity of the recession may have slowed, as indicated by a flattening out of new claims for jobless benefits. That doesn't mean things are necessarily turning around at the moment even if the numbers offer a distant hope. It does mean that thousands more of us in Oregon and Washington will lose our jobs over the next weeks and months, even if we never could have imagined it happening to us, our families or our friends and neighbors.

And it does mean that supporting United Way, its emergency fund and other reputable efforts to help is more important than ever.

Levy said it very nicely this week: "Sometimes you pull the wagon, sometimes you push the wagon," he said. "And sometimes you ride in the wagon."