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United Way donations leap in Allegheny, Westmoreland counties

By Bill Zlatos

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United Way chapters in Allegheny and Westmoreland counties raised more money last year than the year before, bucking the national trend of decreased giving.

Donations to United Way of Allegheny County rose 1 percent last year over 2007 while those to United Way of Westmoreland County rose 44 percent from \$3.6 million to \$5.2 million. The percentage increase from the Greensburg chapter was the second highest in the nation.

"It's a huge increase," said Nancy Kukovich, president of the Westmoreland County chapter. "We're changing the focus of our organization from that of a super-fundraiser for everybody to funding those services that meet the critical needs in our community."

The decline in giving to United Way of America, the nation's biggest charity with a \$4.4 billion operating budget, comes as it faces stiff competition from nonprofits that run workplace campaigns and changes that make employee campaigns harder to conduct.

"One of the challenges for United Way is how to get at those workers ... that are more decentralized, that have more flexible work schedules and lower rates of union membership and higher rates of job turnover," said Emily Barman, associate professor of sociology at Boston University and the author of a book on workplace giving. "Fewer people identify with their employer than they used to."

Kukovich traced the growth in giving in Westmoreland County to three factors: A three-year, \$1 million gift from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, the growth in the number of women who contribute \$1,000 a year from 15 to 135 in three years and a raffle for a new car for donors who contribute at least \$156 a year.

The raffle, paid for by local car dealers, has raised the average gift from \$86 in 2002 to about \$150 now.

Donna Perone, a United Way donor, said that the number of women donors increased because they picked a major community issue that they want to address themselves — how to keep frail, elderly residents in their own homes. The female philanthropists support Faith in Action, a group that finds volunteers to drive senior citizens to doctor's appointments and stores or do light housekeeping for them.

"Personally, I like it because I see people 95 years old, they're healthy, they don't need to be in a nursing home," Perone said. "We allow them to live at home safely and with dignity and also with less burden on our health care system."

Take Millie Lenhart, 86, of Export. She used to ask friends for rides or hire a taxi to go shopping or visit her doctor. Now, she relies on the program expanded by United Way.

"They're a lifesaver for me," she said.

Last year, the Allegheny County chapter increased the number of its donors from 57,356 to 58,257. That's one factor in its success.

Among the nation's 300 biggest United Ways — those that raise at least \$1 million a year — 57 percent reported declines in giving last year, according to The Chronicle of Philanthropy, an independent weekly. The decreases among the largest chapters averaged 5 percent.

Also contributing to the local chapter's success, said Bob Nelkin, president and chief professional officer of United Way of Allegheny County, was a less severe recession in this region, the Pittsburgh's tradition of generosity, and a switch in the campaign message to emphasize the need to help in tough times.

"One of the ways we're adapting to the changing environment is reaching out to more businesses," Nelkin said. He noted that 700 firms ran workplace campaigns with his chapter last year. To date, 721 are taking part.

Other charities, meanwhile, have competed with United Way to run workplace campaigns. In the past 10 years, Chantilly, Va.-based America's Charities has grown from fewer than 10 companies raising \$15 million to more than 100 companies raising \$30 million, said Don Sodo, its president and CEO.

He credits its growth to low overhead and more charities to which employees can donate.

But America's Charities has captured virtually none of the Pittsburgh market.

Tom Knowlton, a vice president with TCC Group, a New York City-based management consulting firm, expects United Way to continue to face more competition from Internet giving and groups like America's Charities.

"United Way has had to compete," he said, "and they're doing pretty well, but it's a much more crowded landscape."

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