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12/14/2005 - Collecting Donations Not Enough for United Way Anymore

Fundraiser looking more closely at how grants are spent as well as launching own charity services

By Helen Gaussoin
For the Journal

The United Way of Santa Fe County, traditionally a fundraising organization that passes money on to social services groups, is adopting a new approach that includes being more directly involved in some programs, the head of the organization said.

”Traditionally, United Ways have been pass-through fundraisers,” said Katherine Freeman, president and chief executive officer of United Way of Santa Fe County. “It has become important to us to have more of a return on the investment. Our focus is now more on making lasting change in the community, to invest in a way that makes it possible to solve chronic problems.”

She said the group has taken steps in this new direction by launching its own programs where it sees a gap in services in Santa Fe, by being more critical in its financial support of other programs, and by creating services that provide administrative support to the groups funded by United Way.

The group has already launched two initiatives— the Agua Fria Children’s Zone, a preschool at Agua Fria Elementary School, and the 211 phone line, a referral service for social services. Freeman said the decision to initiate direct services was not a criticism of Santa Fe’s existing social services groups.

”We were not satisfied to only collect donor dollars and then pass them through,” she said. “We felt an obligation to the community and our donors to have a greater role in how those dollars are used.”

The decision to be directly involved in the creation of the Agua Fria Children’s Zone was partly driven by the conditions of the federal grants used to start it.

”It had to be an existing council dedicated to early childhood. We were in a unique position to bring those federal dollars into the community,” Freeman said.

She said United Way is working with other groups in Santa Fe to run the program. “We’re not going to re-create the wheel.”

The United Way is also taking a more critical approach to who gets United Way funds and how they are distributed, Freeman said. “We are getting clearer and clearer about where we want to focus.”

She said a team of volunteers is spending more time with grant applications and is looking at whether larger grants distributed over longer periods of time would be more effective in creating lasting change. “There are higher expectations on both sides,” she said.

The decision to be more selective in awarding grants has not resulted in the United Way ending funding for

any group.

”We weren’t concerned that money was being thrown down the tubes. We just wanted to be able to measure and then articulate how it was being used,” Freeman said. Funded organizations must report on how the money is being used and what kind of progress has been made. If an organization does not provide United Way with that information, its grant is reviewed.

Freeman said United Way is also working on ways to help organizations with administration chores. That service, to be called “Joe W’s Place” after a former board member, will help with support services and act as an advocate for nonprofits and the people they serve in the Legislature and other forums, Freeman said.