

United Way of Monroe County sets sights higher in 2014

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For the first time in two years, the United Way of Monroe County is raising its annual campaign goal.

After falling about \$10,000 short in the 2011-2012 campaign, the \$1.41 million goal carried over to the next year, when it was exceeded by about \$6,000.

This year, the United Way is taking a chance, increasing the campaign goal to \$1,425,000. Though not a large amount, it's something executive director Barry Lessow thinks will be attainable, in part due to rising economic trends.

"We recognize that we want to set an aspiration goal, but we also try to set a goal that is realistic," he said.

It's a balancing act for the agency to try to find more money for its 24 partners, whose needs have continued to grow as other money sources decreased.

The 2012-2013 campaign ended up with about 1 percent increase from the previous year, which does not seem large, Lessow admitted. But it's still an increase.

"Those dollars are maybe not a large percentage but make a large impact on the agencies," he said.

As little as \$1 a week can provide a night of shelter for domestic violence victims, and \$7 a week can provide breakfast for seven children for a summer, according to data provide by the United Way.

Dan Smith, president and chief operations officer of the Indiana University Foundation, said that easing hunger can start a chain of benefits in the community by giving kids more focus in school which helps them pass tests, which lowers the dropout rate which reduces poverty.

"When you think about the United Way, what we're talking about is an organization that does nothing short then transform our community," Smith said.

To continue its work in the community and meet organizational goals, the United Way has been looking at creative ways to raise more money.

Traditionally, the United Way receives contributions through workplace campaigns at larger businesses, where employees have the money deducted from their paychecks. Working with smaller businesses and connecting with individual donors has increased over time, said Lessow.

Campaign chair Heidi Schulz had an off-the-wall idea to help the United Way reach its goal.

After sharing the story of a boy who collected change in a jar, then donated it to the police department, Schulz encouraged those attending the campaign kickoff luncheon to take home jars that were decorating the tables to collect their own loose change for donation.

Despite some of the problems campaigns and non-profits have faced in the last several years, Lessow is hopeful for the future.

“Shrinking will not happen in 2014,” Lessow said. “2014 will not be the year agencies fold. 2014 can be the year agencies closes their doors at the end of each day in victory.”

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