

Meeting local needs

Giving starts at home with United Way

Many people feel good when they write checks or sign pledge cards to the United Way. They know they've helped others in Volusia and Flagler counties who need assistance.

They also know how United Way works — collecting funds and then distributing them to “partner agencies” ranging from Scouts to senior-service centers. But they may not realize how much their gifts help themselves.

By supporting efforts promoting emergency preparation, child development, disability assistance and anti-poverty services,

United Way contributions strengthen

the whole community — boosting economic development and creating a healthy, strong place for everyone to live.

Still, local donors want to know their contributions are spent wisely. When money is short, priority should go to those areas where the need is greatest — and to agencies that make donations go far and work hard. That is particularly important in the face of national disasters, like the devastating aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, where the need for help is so obvious, immediate and compelling.

The United Way of Volusia-Flagler Counties is accepting that challenge. As the agency kicked off its annual fundraising campaign, it also joined an effort to restructure the way money is distributed among its partner agencies. The goal: Ensure money is directed to meet this community's most pressing needs.

The United Way isn't alone in this project, dubbed Community Agenda. The project seeks to bring together local agencies, churches, businesses, educators, government and the public to identify needs and plan for the future. The project's results — expected in May — might

be used to help distribute money collected this year, and will help focus community attention on areas where the need is greatest.

The agenda-setting project starts with solid data. Leaders already know, for example, that Volusia County has a child abuse and neglect rate almost 30 percent higher than Florida's rate overall, and more than twice the proportion of children in foster care.

The local unemployment rate is lower than the state average — but an above-average number of children are receiving free lunch at school, a key measure of poverty, and per-capita per-



News-Journal file

Volunteers wave to motorists, expressing appreciation to the Volusia-Flagler community for supporting United Way during a past campaign.

sonal income is significantly lower in Volusia County than in the state overall.

The numbers paint a picture — of a community with many young families working hard and struggling to keep up. The number is likely to increase as evacuees from areas hit by hurricanes move to the area. And that's not forgetting the 1,568 people still receiving services in the aftermath of the three storms that hit Volusia and Flagler counties this year. The need to help these families seems likely to emerge as a priority in the Community Agenda project.

United Way officials plan to use the agenda-setting process to make sure every dollar donated is put to best use. But all this work won't go far without public support — and donations.

This year's fundraising goal is \$3.7 million, a modest increase from last year's \$3.6 million. It's a reasonable request, almost too reasonable in light of the area's needs. By working through the Community Agenda process, the United Way can ensure that donated funds will be well-spent — and continue to earn the community's trust and support.

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