

# 'Miracle' networking

## United Way able to maintain level of giving

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At a time when funding for social services is on the endangered list, United Way of the DuPage Area has managed something of a miracle.

The group will invest \$3.7 million in local agencies in the coming year, the same amount United Way invested last year.

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Lionel Russell, 22, who is in NCO Youth & Family Services' male transitional housing program, prays before his lunch Wednesday in his Aurora apartment. Russell has been in the program since December 2007. "It's a blessing," Russell said.

(Danielle Gardner/Staff Photographer)

That's good news for Lionel Russell, 22, who is part of a male transitional housing program run by Naperville-based and United Way-supported NCO Youth & Family Services.

Homeless only 18 months ago, Russell was staying in a St. Charles shelter when he was referred to NCO's transitional housing program in Aurora.

"They accepted me as I was, which was with nothing," Russell said. "Now I'm growing, and I feel better about myself."

Russell is working toward his GED and learning medical terminology while in the program.

"I feel like this is an opportunity," he said. "I'm getting up there in age, and there wasn't going to be too many chances for me."

Many social service agencies are running out of chances themselves. Ron Hume, NCO's executive director, said that as funding is harder and harder to come by, the support of United Way has been invaluable.

United Way's investment of \$115,000 accounts for 5 percent of NCO's budget.

"Right now, to have the stability of United Way in the midst of all this turmoil and confusion, it gives us 5 percent we don't have to worry about," Hume said. "Pull that out of our budget, and that's a whole lot of people who won't have a job tomorrow."

From the \$3.7 million dispersed by United Way of the DuPage Area this year, \$416,957 will be invested in financial stability programs; \$869,947 will be invested in children and youth programs; \$1,808,408 will be invested in health and wellness programs; and \$619,527 will be invested in crisis intervention programs.

Hume was "shocked" when United Way announced it would be able to maintain its funding levels. "I have a one-word quote," he said. "Yippee!"

"Our individual donors have really stayed pretty constant," Hume said. "Where we are suffering the most is sponsorship for our events. I was afraid United Way was going to have a shortfall this year."

### **Why didn't it?**

"I would say a good portion is due to the merger," said United Way of the DuPage Area chief professional officer Christine Lewis, referring to the group's consolidation with Naperville United Way in October of 2008.

Because the two United Way branches dealt with the same social service agencies 75 percent of the time, Lewis said, there was a lot of doubling up on paperwork, application reviews, site visits and other administrative duties.

"Once you start there, it freed up staff to pursue more fundraising," she said.

Merger, though, can often be as scary of a word as cutbacks. Yet Lewis said combining the two entities did not involve any employee layoffs.

"Part of our agreement is we weren't saving just a salary line item," she said. "We were redeploying where those salaries would go."

Consolidation was only one factor in United Way's comparatively successful fundraising efforts last year, however.

"Timing was a key point for us," Lewis said. "A lot of our major companies ran programs in the fall (before the economy had taken a turn for the worse). Two months' difference was night and day for us."

Still, United Way could see that donations were still down by the start of 2009, so fundraisers redoubled

their efforts.

"We've gone back to all our donors and asked if you can give \$5 more this year," Lewis said. "In February, we went back to the largest donors to make up for it, and they stepped up and helped."

That included Kellogg Company, which increased its giving to United Way by 15 percent through a combination of employee pledges, corporate gifts and special events. The \$323,700 total gift earned Kellogg the United Way designation as No. 1 Top Corporate Citizen for the year.

But will United Way donors — top and otherwise — be able to maintain their level of giving next year?

"Obviously the concern is all the data shows the toughest year for fundraising is after the recession," Lewis said. "Certain things we're trying to head off."

One bright spot for the coming year is a \$100,000 matching grant offered by an anonymous donor. If United Way is able to raise \$100,000 for its endowment fund, the donor will match it.

As such money trickles down from donors through the United Way and on to places such as NCO Youth & Family Services, it eventually makes its way toward the betterment of someone like Lionel Russell.

Russell hopes to earn his GED in the next few months, land a job in the medical support field and move out of the NCO's transitional housing program.

"I've always wanted to become something successful. I've always wanted to just be happy. I didn't want to be confused," Russell said. "It feels good to know someone has your back, and that's what THP (the transitional housing program) does."