

Nonprofits struggle to keep up with needs

Today's dismal headlines are enough to make us all pull the covers over our heads. Thousands of people losing their homes due to foreclosures. Gas prices topping \$4 a gallon. People struggling to put food on their tables.

Who can think about philanthropy at a time like this? In tough times, charity seems a luxury. The natural instinct is to hold on tight to what we have. It's easy to convince ourselves to stop giving or to give less than we would normally, in the same way we might curtail going out to restaurants.

In fact, the reality is just the opposite. During rocky economic times, it's even more crucial that we as individuals and businesses support the nonprofits and service organizations helping vulnerable individuals.

Organizations working with those hurting most are stretched to the max. Though our region is exceedingly wealthy and generous, donations are drying up. Nonprofits are receiving less funding from government, corporations and individuals. To cope, groups face tough choices. Some are laying off staff and trying to do more with volunteers. Ultimately, they likely will serve fewer people.

Individuals, businesses and nonprofits can make a huge impact on families, especially those headed by single mothers who are a paycheck from catastrophe. At the Women's Foundation, we believe in what we call "the power of giving together," or the notion that if people and businesses invest their resources together toward a common goal, this collective giving has a dramatic impact. It's a smart strategy enabling us to do more with less. We focus this collective giving where we think it will have the most bang for the buck — on low-income women. If we help these women, it has broader repercussions — we help lift their entire families out of poverty and thus strengthen the entire community.

Our grantee partners — the nonprofit organizations funded by the Women's Foundation — work with some of those most hurt in the economic crunch: single mothers in

low-paying jobs. The anecdotes we hear reveal the extent of the problem. One of our grantees sees more people in need due to foreclosures and mortgage rescue scams. Another reports that tenants who want to buy a building before it's sold off are having great difficulty finding developers with whom to work on the purchase and needed repairs. At the same time, people are using credit cards to stretch their money, making them unable to reduce debt and save. More people are turning to food banks to get by, and people on food stamps are having a harder time stretching their dollars.

Our organization gives more than \$1 million a year in grants to local nonprofits to address critical issues facing women and girls, including economic security, education, jobs, health, domestic violence and diversity. We have no plans to cut our grants, but even our organization, like so many others locally, is feeling the pinch.

Instead of retrenching, our community must continue investments in services, such as job training, health care and financial literacy. We believe our multiyear, \$5 million Stepping Stones initiative, in which we give grants to local nonprofits for such services, has helped working, single mothers in our region weather the financial crunch by helping them find better jobs, get out of debt and build savings.

This is a comprehensive strategy that works. And yet, we also know that these women are among the most vulnerable in a downturn — often the very first to lose jobs and rely on credit to make ends meet. Now is when they need us most. So instead of giving up, come join us. As tough as these times may seem, we can't hide under the covers.

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Guest Comment

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