

United Way sets \$785K goal

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — The United Way of Addison County (UWAC) will soon launch its 2025-2026 fund drive, through which it hopes to raise at least \$785,000 in its mission to help charitable organizations in our area that assist folks in need.

This year's UWAC goal is \$35,000 more than the \$750,000 target the organization set (and surpassed) for 2024-25. Spurred in part by a special "Addison County Responds: Flood Relief" campaign for those who'd been hammered by local flooding, the

overall 2024-25 UWAC fund drive netted an impressive \$909,215, according to the United Way's annual report.

For that and other reasons — including Addison County's long history of helping those less fortunate — UWAC Development & Marketing Director Erin Reed believes \$785,000 is an eminently doable target.

"We have a wonderful donor base of people who really understand the needs in Addison County, and those needs are changing and growing," Reed said on Tuesday during an

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THE UNITED WAY of Addison County is seeking to raise \$785,000 during the coming year to support local nonprofits that assist low-income residents. Pictured, from left, are the organization’s Development & Marketing Director Erin Reed, Executive Director Helena Van Voorst, and board Chair Silvia Gonzalez.

Independent photo/John Flowers

United Way

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interview that included UWAC Executive Director Helena Van Voorst and Sylvia Gonzalez, the nonprofit’s board chairperson.

Last year, flooding and an uptick in homelessness were two major poverty/misery drivers in Addison County.

Multiple chapters of 2025-26 are left to be written, but the federal government has offered a challenging preview.

The federal Budget Reconciliation Bill, passed by GOP majority on July 3 and signed into law by President Donald Trump on July 4, will reduce Medicaid spending by \$900 million and could result in as many as 17 million Americans losing their federal health care subsidy, according to Vermont’s congressional delegation.

Currently, 168,000 Vermonters — 26% of the state’s population — are covered by Medicaid, according to U.S. Rep. Becca Balint, D-Vt. She added 75% of all Vermont adults currently covered by Medicaid are working.

The Budget Reconciliation Bill also cuts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding by 20%, with the latest estimates showing that more than of 14,000 Vermonters could lose some or all of their SNAP (3SquaresVT) benefits, according to Balint.

A reduced federal commitment will put more strain on state government and local charitable organizations like Helping Overcome Poverty’s Effects, the Addison County Parent-Child Center and the Open Door Clinic. It’s on this shaky financial landscape that UWAC officials will try to ensure the county’s social services safety net doesn’t break. And that will mean marshalling as many resources as possible, a process UWAC will ceremonially begin with two “Days of Caring” on Thursday, Sept. 18 and Saturday, Sept. 20.

On those two days, volunteers will fan out to nonprofits throughout the county pitching in with special projects. That might include stuffing envelopes, painting a fence or stocking a food shelf. It’s a team-building as well as philanthropic exercise; area businesses are invited to send Days of Caring teams to participate with individuals who make it an annual appointment. The Middlebury College community has been particularly involved in Days of Caring.

Check out unitedwayaddisoncounty.org/days-of-caring to learn more and sign up.

The lion’s share of funding that UWAC reaps during its annual campaign helps fuel 38 community partners in the county that provide services ranging from housing to childcare. The organization ended up with \$562,072 last year to divide among its community partners, according to its 2024-25 annual report.

Of that, the vast majority — \$414,737 — was distributed in the form of three-year “community impact grants” to local nonprofits to improve the health-related services for our neighbors in need. In 2025-26, grants will go to nonprofits dispensing education aid. And in 2026-27, the grants will be aimed at efforts to upgrade the financial stability of those in poverty.

It’s a three-pronged priority list that will continue to rotate each year.

In addition to the \$414,737 in community impact grants it handed out for 2024-25, the UWAC deployed another \$56,072 for various community programs and \$92,263 for what it called “mission investments,” for such things as warming kits for the homeless and donations to five Addison County food shelves.

“It’s very difficult, because our resources never match the requests, and there are so many worthy organizations in Addison County

— each in their own unique area, doing some very important work,” Van Voorst said.

Fortunately, the UWAC’s assistance is more than transactional. Partners can also rely on United Way volunteers and staff, who are well versed in grant writing and the human services field.

“Once we make a funding relationship with a nonprofit, we’re really saying, ‘Here’s some funding, and here’s all the capacity we have to help you,’” she said.

Gonzalez was a member of the UWAC Community Impact Funding Review Team prior to becoming chair of the United Way board. She echoed Van Voorst’s comments about difficult funding decisions and described the painstaking work the review team does prior to recommending grant awards. Each of the 12 members researches the nonprofits and their financial requests, an annual exercise capped by a site visit to each potential grantee.

She said the site visit often proves to be the most illuminating and rewarding part of the review process.

“We learn so much there, meeting the people doing the actual work and understanding the needs and impact the organizations are having,” she said.

Recent years have seen the UWAC streamline its application process in a manner that puts more emphasis on site visits and less on paperwork. Applicants now submit a two-page letter of interest, rather than a stack of supporting documents. But each review is still thorough; the review team typically begins its work in March and makes funding recommendations to the UWAC board in May.

“Everyone is doing absolutely needed work, but our funds are limited, and we want to make sure they make the most impact,” Gonzalez said.

She credited United Way volunteers and staff for their work

in exploring grant opportunities and working with local nonprofits. The staff includes Community Initiatives and Grants Manager Celia Heath, and Community Impact Manager Amy Hoekstra.

“We have an amazing group of people working in this office. They are incredibly knowledgeable, professional and dedicated,” Gonzalez said. “Encouraging the relationship between this office and the people who are doing the (nonprofit) work is crucial, especially in these times.”

If you’d like to donate, volunteer or learn more about UWAC, go to unitedwayaddisoncounty.org.

While clouds are gathering on the horizon for federal human services funding, UWAC officials hope they and local nonprofits will be able to let some sunshine through during the stormy times ahead.

“Yes, there is trepidation, but there’s also faith in the resilience of our community and in our nonprofits,” Van Voorst said. “One of the strengths of Addison County is we seem to come together really well during these times.”

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HARE AND THE DOG

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