

Letter to the Editor 2014

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UNITED WAY FUND DISTRIBUTION PROCESS OFFERS UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS

United Way of Whatcom County has a vision for our community: a place where all kids enter kindergarten ready to learn and are behaviorally on track, where teens make healthy choices and graduate high school on time, where families have stable income and a roof overhead, and where all people are healthy and have access to crucial medical needs. To achieve this vision United Way has specific goals in Education, Income, and Health and works in a variety of ways to reach these goals: utilizing research and current data on community issues, fundraising, engaging and educating the community, political advocacy, special projects and initiatives, and community impact grants.

Since 2008, I have had the honor to serve on United Way's Fund Distribution Committee, which meets during the month of May and oversees the community impact grant process. Each year 40-50 volunteers are separated in to three panels (Education, Income, and Health) to review programs and make tough decisions regarding which programs to fund and how much each program will receive. Who are these dedicated individuals? The beauty of this committee is the variety of the individuals and the many experiences and opinions that are brought to the table. Volunteers range from stay-at-home dads to CEO's, bankers to nonprofit professionals, students to professors, engineers to realtors and everything in between. At the end of the day, all members are there to help create a measurable difference in the community and to ensure a transparent and effective process.

On the Education Panel, which I have been the chair of for several years, we take into consideration the variety of programs and the best practices it takes to move the needle on these important community issues. There is always more need for funds than there are funds available so weighing all the considerations for what will make the most impact is always an interesting challenge. United Way is prioritizing efforts on preventive actions to stop issues before they happen, recognizing that it takes a variety of programs and tactics to develop preventive solutions and achieve community goals. For example, in order to increase the high school graduation rate (one of United Way's top goals) it's important to ensure families have the tools needed for a stable home life, to increase opportunities for early childhood development so children enter kindergarten ready to learn, to make sure kids are fed and

able to concentrate in school, and to provide after school programs and outlets to keep kids on track. All of those programs and strategies combine to raise the graduation rate and produce healthy, stable adults.

Keeping United Way's goals in mind, committee volunteers attend numerous site visits that allow us to see a wide range of community programs in action, meet staff and volunteers, and ensure that United Way dollars are being invested as effectively and efficiently as possible. Right now Fund Distribution Panels are meeting daily, visiting programs, reviewing finances, and learning about the variety of efforts it takes to create long term community change. The panels review each of the programs funded from the previous year, seeing this return on investment and the lives changed is truly inspiring. After all visits are conducted and grants are reviewed, the panels meet to give their final recommendations for program funding. The ultimate determiner for funding is based on the program's ability to achieve one of the specific goals in Education, Income, and/or Health. With a variety of groups focused on the same goals and working together, we have seen these efforts pay off in Whatcom County with a 30% decrease in homelessness, a 10% increase in literacy readiness for entering kindergartners, and an increase in access to recreational facilities just to name a few.

Taking part in this process is a labor of love. As my panel visits the agencies that work for our community one cannot help but be overcome by the sanguine attitude and dedication of their staff and volunteers. I have seen babies benefit from early intervention and retiree's lives enriched from extra help around their home. Young families that without the help of our community would be struggling so much more. Working at the WTA downtown bus station I see firsthand how the United Way contributions make a difference in people's lives. The improvement to our community can be seen throughout our county. I challenge all to continue to work to improve our community. Give to a charity, advocate for someone who cannot advocate for themselves, and volunteer to be an agent of change.

Because volunteers raise the funds and volunteers distribute the funds, this is truly a community owned process that helps create opportunities and inspire hope for a better tomorrow. I am so proud to volunteer with United Way of Whatcom County and to be part of this crucial community changing effort.

Geoff Beaumont, Operations Supervisor
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