

The United Way is no longer just about handouts. Now it's lending a hand to extend social-service networks beyond downtown to the increasingly poor inner suburbs.

A brand new way

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There is the logo with the cupped hand under a rainbow. There are the dogged workplace fundraisers. There are the cheques for a long list of worthwhile causes, from food banks and community centres to daycares and women's shelters. But, these days, that's not all.



The United Way of Greater Toronto, that trusty stalwart of community fundraising, is rolling up its sleeves and moving beyond its traditional role of supporting social service agencies. As part of its increasingly activist role, it is producing a flurry of reports and initiatives intended to identify and assist the city's poorest neighbourhoods.

When many of the 200 organizations now funded through the United Way opened their doors, the needy were concentrated downtown. Today, however, many live in the so-called inner suburbs where rents are lower, but social programs are few and far between.

And poor communities have not only shifted, they have mushroomed. In 1981, Toronto had 30 higher-poverty neighbourhoods, mainly clustered downtown, according to a United Way report last year called *Poverty by Postal Code*. By 2001, the number had exploded to 120 and an astounding 92 of them were located in Scarborough and North York. Demographics are also changing, and many new immigrants are settling in areas lacking programs.

Faced with the stark reality of statistics – along with grumbling by donors and member agencies that underlying needs were not being addressed – the United Way embarked on a new mission. In addition to raising and allocating money, it has become intensely focused on neighbourhood development and community-building through research and advocacy.

"Our work in neighbourhoods is starting to change the way United Way views itself, its role in the community, and it's changing the way we're working," says Dan Clement, the agency's director of strategic initiatives.

Part of the objective is to foster vibrant community hubs – whether in libraries, health clinics or coffee shops – where people come together and plant seeds for neighbourhoods to flourish.

The United Way is also producing several reports measuring existing neighbourhood services – work for which nose-to-the-grind agencies have neither time nor cash – which it hopes will be used to spot specific needs in communities. It has ranked neighbourhoods according to several categories, including income, unemployment, education, repair needs, teen birth rate, mobility, recent immigrants and knowledge

of official languages. A report due next month will list virtually every service offered at the local level, from community gardens to basketball courts, and identify five to 10 especially needy neighbourhoods.

The new focus does not mean the United Way will stop providing stable funding to the agencies it now supports. However, new money – and hoped-for partnerships with other organizations – will be directed to neighbourhood priorities.

Downtown Toronto is relatively well serviced, with established agencies such as Dixon Hill, Food-Share and Jessie's Centre for Teenagers. And while that will remain the case, the United Way hopes some groups will step up efforts to serve the inner suburbs. Already, its research helped Youthlink, a charity focused on youth, decide to move its head office to Scarborough from downtown Toronto, said Frances Lankin, the United Way's president and CEO.

The outcome of the process, the agency hopes, will be concrete suggestions for needy areas that organizations, including the United Way, and governments can use to target assistance, said Barney Savage, a United Way senior policy adviser. It might, for example, fund after-school sports programs or new mother's groups in under-serviced areas. It will not, however, build new facilities, such as basketball courts, though Mr. Savage said it will push governments to invest in infrastructure and better co-ordinate work between departments.

Getting so involved in politics is a role some may question for the non-profit charity, said John Honderich, a member of the United Way's board of trustees and an adviser to the mayor on urban issues. But he says government can't do everything. "Sure, I guess in a perfect world if the government were doing all this, then fine."

A key part of the United Way's strategy is a recently announced federally funded two-year research project focusing on community development in five neighbourhoods across the country, including one in Toronto, the location of which it won't yet reveal. Co-ordinated by the United Way, the project will engage local residents, agencies and businesses to develop a vision for neighbourhood renewal.

The underlying principle is bottom-up participation and helping residents identify their own needs – a key trend in community development.

"Outsiders can't come in and do that. It makes no sense. Middle-class professionals don't really know the lived experience in a neighbourhood and what's needed there," said David Hulchanski, director of the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto.

This approach allows for the kind of intimate details no map can provide. For example, Mr. Savage said, accessing a program for people who live in public housing in the East and West Mall means crossing busy highway 427. So some residents don't. A report would also never tell him that a community centre in the Jane-Finch area is of little interest to youngsters. "It's got bocce ball instead of basketball...The community is changing. How do you plot that on a map?"

In producing vibrant community hubs, the hope is that poor neighbourhoods will prosper. If immigrant women, for instance, bring their children to a play group, they will share information and ease isolation. Someone may find another's husband a job. A woman may learn of a caring doctor. Their families may become friends.

And maybe one day, inner-suburb dwellers will have easy access to the same kind of social-service agencies as downtowners.

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