

Foundations unite to provide recession relief

To help social service agencies respond to the escalating needs of clients during the recent recession, several Central Indiana philanthropies—Lilly Endowment among them—created the Community Economic Relief Fund (CERF) in December 2008.

Twelve months later, more than 6,000 households in six counties have benefited from the \$8 million collaborative effort, to which the Endowment has contributed \$6.5 million.

“During our site visits with grantees last year we learned that people who normally don’t ask for help were seeking assistance for basic needs because of the economy,” explains Betsy Bikoff, vice president and chief grant-making officer for the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, one of the funding partners. “At the same time, donations to nonprofit organizations were declining.” The idea for CERF took shape after Fairbanks staff and their funding



colleagues compared notes and determined that the situation called for a rapid and unified response.

An initial Endowment grant of \$2 million to the United Way of Central Indiana (UWCI), which administers CERF, along with grants from several other funders, helped move the project forward. Within a month the group had agreed on a mission, allocated resources, developed a fund-distribution process and invited 45 social service agencies to submit proposals.

“The funding partners were very specific about their purpose,” says Christie Gillespie, CERF’s manager and director of agency services at UWCI. “They wanted to reach out to families who had immediate needs for housing, utilities and food. They also wanted to support agencies that are engaged in hunger-prevention and homeless-prevention activities.” The availability of funds had a quick and dramatic impact, as documented by agency personnel who shared statistics and stories in a CERF blog supervised by Gillespie.

“So many of our clients are facing home evictions, cars breaking down and utility disconnect notices while struggling to pay their bills each month,” wrote Judy House, founder of Fresh Start of Indiana. “The CERF funds have literally kept a roof over their heads, put meals on their tables and allowed them to keep their jobs because they have reliable transportation to get to and from work each day.”

Agencies confirmed that many families suffered domino-like hardships—one negative event touching off a series of equally negative events. As an example, persons who lose jobs also lose health insurance coverage, which means they can’t afford their medications, which can lead to serious consequences. These sorts of challenges also can cause families to break apart; domestic abuse and conflict tend to increase in time of financial distress. Accordingly, CERF funds also have been used for mental health counseling to help keep families together.

Another phenomenon: Many agencies have seen a surge in clients who have never applied for public assis-

tance and are unfamiliar with the process. “There’s a lot of pride and shame associated with it for some families, and so they often wait until the very last minute to ask for help,” says Gillespie. “They have no idea how the system works. They don’t realize that the longer they wait the fewer options they have.”

To acquaint newcomers with the scope of services available through CERF, a portion of the fund was earmarked for an awareness campaign. The communication effort gained momentum when local media outlets donated an estimated \$250,000 worth of exposure to the cause. The key message—“Get help. Don’t wait. Call 2-1-1”—was accompanied by an illustration of a row of dominos, each depicting a reason that a client might seek help. These included the pressing needs that the philanthropic partners had agreed to address during their early discussions: housing, utilities and food.

“One of the unique aspects of our community is the closeness and communication among its funders,” says Ellen Annala, UWCI president. “These philanthropies altered their normal giving practices and added to the support they regularly give to United Way to participate in this fund. They all stepped up because they understood the need was extraordinary.”

Community Economic Relief Fund (CERF) Major contributors:

**Central Indiana Community Foundation
(affiliate and funds)**
Efroymsen Family Fund
Indianapolis Foundation
Indianapolis Retirement Home Fund
Lilly Endowment
Lumina Foundation
Moore Foundation
Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust
Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation
United Way of Central Indiana

OPPOSITE: Myron K. Richardson, executive director of Flanner House in Indianapolis, looks over a picture book with youngsters and gets some special commentary from 4-year-old Erin Lloyd. Recession was the spur that helped Indianapolis-area foundations set up a special fund so social agencies wouldn’t close and people could get help in “the system.”