

Nonprofit groups sharpen fundraising strategies in recession

By KATIE ARCIERI, Staff Writer

Published 07/05/09

As donors give less in a fragile economy, local nonprofit groups are revamping their fundraising tactics to not only lure more donors but also more dollars.

Hospice of the Chesapeake, which provides hospice care to the terminally ill in Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties, is focusing on bigger philanthropists while providing donors with more time to fulfill pledges. "We will say, 'Take an extra year or two in a pledge, and get it all done in three years,'" said Erwin Abrams, the hospice's president and chief executive officer. "It shows that we also are cognizant of what they are going through."

The Community Foundation of Anne Arundel County, meanwhile, is focusing on sharpening its message and "making sure that it is easy and accessible," said Bess Langbein, the foundation's executive director. "We're doing more contacts with our donors and we're doing more stewardship, which means keeping better contact with the donors and spending more time thanking them," she said.

For the first time in more than two decades, U.S. giving is down, albeit 2 percent. Last year, total estimated charitable giving amounted to \$307.65 billion, down from a record \$314.07 billion in 2007, according to Giving USA, which publishes reports on philanthropy. Now, foundations across the country are faced with attracting donors at a time when nearly everyone is cutting back. That's caused nonprofit groups to rethink their strategies or simply stick to the basics. "It's really difficult right now," said Michael Nilsen, senior director of public affairs for the Association of Fundraising Professionals in Arlington, Va. Nilsen said organizations are now focusing less on special fundraising events and more on getting out their message to the community. "There's no sort of magical formula or special event or innovation," he said. "It's really just the basic tried-and-true message, reaching out like they never have before."

Lisa Hillman, executive director of the Anne Arundel Medical Center Foundation, said her organization is focused on the message of helping the region medically with its \$424 million expansion, which includes the hospital's new Health Sciences Pavilion that opened last month. The hospital's Care Like No Other campaign aims to raise \$44 million by 2011. So far, \$32 million has been raised. The expansion will include an eight-story patient tower, 50 more patient rooms, an expanded emergency department, a pediatric emergency department and new operating room suites. "The message is really clear," Hillman said. While the foundation is focusing on its message, the group also is being more flexible with donors, she said. "Many people are saying, 'Can we extend our pledges over a longer period of time?'" Hillman said. "We're also finding that some donors are taking more time to think about their commitment before they make them." While many groups are focusing on getting out information about their mission to donors, some are still hoping to strike a chord with special fundraising events. Nilsen, of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, said special events can still be effective, if they are unique enough.

The Brick Companies, a private Edgewater company that owns a network of golf courses, set up a 25-foot inflatable Godzilla at a recent fundraiser for its foundation outside The Greene Turtle restaurant in Edgewater. It cost players \$5 to shoot golf balls into Godzilla's mouth. "It was so cool and so ridiculous we couldn't resist," said Charlie Birney, Executive Director of the company's foundation. Attendees also could pay \$5 for three throws to dunk Birney and other company employees in a tank, as well. Birney estimated about 30 to 40 people attended the event, which raised more than \$500, he said. Birney said the Godzilla fundraiser was a less expensive alternative to fancier fundraising events his organization holds. "I call it micro-fundraising," he said. "I think that's something that's being ignored." Birney said he's not going after the \$10,000 donor. "These small local impact fun events are really important," he said. "It's certainly more fun."



Joshua McKerrow — The Capital Charlie Birney, executive director for The Brick Cos. foundation, looks out of a dunk tank after being knocked in at a recent fundraiser. Birney said he's turned to "micro-fundraising" to gain more dollars for his foundation.