Outgoing United Way of Greater Houston CEO guides organization through change before retirement

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As United Way of Greater Houston CEO Anna Babin approaches her previously announced retirement, she's also leading the organization in shifting its investment strategy to focus on financial independence for Houston's working poor.

United Way's "Second Century Vision" — aligned with the organization's upcoming 100th anniversary in 2021 — will focus on the financial wellbeing of those in poverty and those whom the organization has identified as "asset limited, income constrained, employed" or ALICE. Over the next two years, the United Way will redeploy its investments into the organizations it identifies as furthering the mission of financial wellbeing for the working poor. Some $50.4 million in grants will be under review, the United Way confirmed.

"What we're doing is assessing every program that we invest in. We're asking our agencies to assess every one of their programs to see if it's a strategic fit," Babin told the Houston Business Journal.

Babin admitted that following the strategic review of United Way's partner organizations, some of its current programs might not fit. Some local nonprofit organizations that receive funds from the United Way have reportedly voiced concerns that if they're not aligned with the Second Century Vision, they might miss out on that funding in the future. Babin insists that any reduction in giving will be tapered down over the two-year process, and she said the United Way will work with its partners to find supplemental sources of funding.

Babin provided the following statement to the HBJ:

I have worked alongside our nonprofit partners for many years. As CEO of the United Way of Greater Houston, I pledged to be open and honest with them. They are my colleagues and collaborators in making the Greater Houston community stronger. As soon as the board of trustees approved Second Century Vision in early 2018, I began communicating with them, and, every step of the way, I have shared with them what has been approved. To date, no decisions have been made regarding changes in program investments for 2022. We are taking two years to finalize our implementation plan, and, all along the way, we are obtaining agency input. They are a part of building the future of this community. Any changes in funding will be made thoughtfully and with ample transition time.

Babin is set to retire by March 31, 2020, and the United Way of Greater Houston is still working to select its next CEO. In the interim, Babin is still focused on leading the organization. Once she retires, Babin looks forward to spending more time with her grandchildren and writing a book, and she's not ruling out some consulting work on the side.

Babin has served as CEO of the United Way since August 2005. On her first day, she led the local social service response for Hurricane Katrina, she said. During her tenure, Babin led the United Way’s responses to hurricanes Rita, Ike and Harvey and raised hundreds of millions of dollars from Houston's philanthropic community.

Babin also led the organization when it launched the United Way Thrive program a decade ago. The program “leverages more than 20 nonprofit partners and partnerships with employers, community colleges, financial institutions, and city and state
agencies to provide families with the best and most comprehensive resources, wraparound support and the services they need to reach real and lasting financial independence," per its website. So far, United Way Thrive has helped more than 211,000 low-income families.

"It will be an emotional parting for me. I have a great love for this organization, this mission and the staff," Babin said. "It's been my love; it's been my life. It's just time for new leadership."

Based on its gross income of $126.73 million, the United Way of Greater Houston is No. 8 on the HBJ's 2019 Largest Houston-Area Better Business Bureau Charitable Organizations List.

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