Dire need demands new United Way strategy

With high number of households in poverty, group must adapt to help those struggling

by Jamey Rootes and Anna Babin

James Baldwin once said: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

In the Greater Houston community, it’s time for all of us to face this problem — 40 percent of households in our local area are struggling every day just to cover basic needs. The majority of these households are working families. They’re moms and dads who may be holding down two or three jobs and still aren’t able to comfortably cover the basics such as rent, food, utilities and child care, let alone have any money left for a “rainy day.” As we head into the holidays, imagine what life must be like where there are young children in these households.

United Way of Greater Houston has long served as a crucial social services safety net in this community. We have made it our priority to help improve the lives of the most vulnerable throughout our nearly 100-year history. In recent years, as the cost of living in Houston has increased, we’ve seen the needs grow exponentially as more families fall behind. These facts are from the most recent ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Report for Texas, a study that uses real costs in each county to quantify the population that struggles to make ends meet. The ALICE report underscores the breadth of this issue, which we should all care about. As a community, when the most vulnerable among us becomes stronger, we all become stronger.

In looking to the future, United Way of Greater Houston is strengthening our focus on helping our community’s working poor, and those living below the poverty level, to attain a more sustainable quality of life. This direction, called Second Century Vision, builds upon United Way’s established capabilities and 80-year track record of success in helping hard-working, low-income families improve their financial standing. Over the past decade, United Way THRIVE, a collaborative of more than 20 nonprofit partners, plus employers, community colleges, government agencies and others, has assisted more than 28,000 families on their path to financial stability and created more than $11 billion in value for these families and our local community through increased wages, savings, assets and reduced debts.

United Way has learned what works: a comprehensive and individualized approach to providing services that range from job training and financial coaching to physical and mental health services to early learning and after-school programs so parents can work while knowing that their children are in a good, safe place. Based on each family’s needs, we must find ways to remove the barriers to their success.

Meanwhile, United Way will continue to serve as a vital safety net for our community, answering calls for help 24/7/365 at the 211 helpline and connecting our most vulnerable to the resources they need. As always, you can also count on us to lead recovery efforts when disaster strikes.

We’re excited about our Second Century Vision and the opportunity to improve the trajectory of families for generations in our community. It won’t be easy, as United Way adjusts how it operates internally and with the many nonprofits who partner with us.

In making any adjustments to United Way program investments over the next two years as a part of Second Century Vision, please know that we will be thoughtful, collaborative and transparent as we work through this together for the good of our community.

We’re passionate about what United Way can accomplish as we move boldly into our next century. We can do and be even more for Houston. The countless ways this organization has strengthened our community in its first 100 years would not have been possible without the generous gifts from our caring donors, and we thank you. We hope we can count on your continued support. If you have not donated to the United Way in the past and you would like to help lift up struggling families in our community, we hope you’ll join us now. We have been champions of Houston for 100 years – and our best years are still to come.

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