

EDITORIALS

Editorial: United Way guides nonprofits into its 'Driving the Dream' initiative against poverty

The venerable philanthropic force United Way of the Mid-South, known for dispensing millions of dollars over the decades to organizations throughout the Memphis metro area, is sharpening its focus to make a dent in a seemingly intractable problem.

Led by president and chief executive officer Dr. Kenneth Robinson, the organization has begun leveraging the dollars it distributes to nearly 80 high-performing nonprofit agencies, guiding them to focus on the same goals and to work together to form a social services system of care.

The main goal of the "Driving the Dream" initiative is fighting poverty and helping families become self-sufficient.

In our minds, it is a prudent move that takes the agency beyond just providing services to people with a variety of needs. It puts a strong emphasis on making sure they reach a situation in life where they no longer need these services.

It has meant that, for the first time, organizations receiving a total of \$13.7 million in the new fiscal year for United Way funding are finding somewhat more or somewhat fewer dollars based on the poverty-fighting mission, Robinson said.

Robinson has been at the helm of United Way, founded in 1923, since February 2015. He is a minister, physician and poverty fighter. From 1991-2016, he also served as pastor and CEO of St. Andrew AME Church at Mississippi Boulevard and South Parkway East, where he led the congregation in developing health and human services programs, high-quality child care, economic development initiatives, and pre-K and elementary education.

He founded an associated community development corporation, The Works, Inc., which has brought more than \$22 million in new investment to the area.

With the support of the agency's board of directors, Robinson is bringing the same focus to United Way.

It also is about getting more bang for the organization's buck.

Tax filings show public support dropped 25 percent, from about \$26.5 million in 2010 to \$19.8 million in 2014, and the organization reported shortfalls of more than \$2 million in 2014-15 and \$1.5 million the previous year. Robinson said the reinvention of United Way comes at a time that the organization has stopped a trend of year-over-year losses.

Ninety-six percent of United Way contributions are made through workplace campaigns, where payroll deductions and, in some cases, company matches are available. Downsizing by companies during the Great Recession, plus a rising preference by firms and the millennial generation for direct giving and engagement with charities, have been cited as factors.

In the larger picture, United Way has joined the "collaboration" movement taking place in Memphis, where organization are tearing down silos to find more efficient ways to combine resources and strategies to attack poverty and the social forces that contribute to it.

United Way is working closely with the Greater Memphis Chamber Chairman's Circle, the city's Workforce Investment Network and the Greater Memphis Alliance for a Competitive Workforce, among others, Robinson said.

For 93 years, United Way has been a force for good in Memphis and the surrounding area, and has provided a way, through employee deduction, for residents to contribute toward helping their fellow citizens.

We think the organization's new focus will have an even bigger impact by helping more citizens climb out of poverty.

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