Nothing, perhaps, signals the start of the end-of-year giving season as distinctly as the appearance of the Salvation Army's iconic red kettles in shopping areas around Dane County. The donations dropped into the kettles — which debuted for the season this past weekend — may be more impulsive than those other organizations receive in response to year-end solicitations, but the Salvation Army is not the only local charity holding its breath to see what the next couple of months will bring.

The end of the year is a critical and hard-to-predict time for charitable fundraising — one local director reports that 75 percent of end-of-year gifts to her organization come in the last week of December. But giving so far this year suggests that nonprofits in Dane County, with its comparatively stable employment base of state government, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as health care and financial services sectors, may continue to fare better than many others have nationally since the economic recession started to pinch charitable giving in 2008. Or maybe not.

Demand for services sure is higher. "We've already seen over 2,700 families asking for help for Christmas," says Maj. Paul Moore of the Salvation Army of Dane County. His organization is hoping to collect $625,000 from kettles this year, up $10,000 from a year ago, when the average check dropped into the kettle dropped from $40 or $50 to $20 or $30. "It shows people are concerned and being very, very conservative in their giving," Moore says. Still, those checks, along with the dollar bills and quarters tossed into the kettles, enabled the agency to "just barely" make its kettle goal last year, he says.

Donations to the 400 national charities that raise the most money from the public was down a startling 11 percent in 2009, the Chronicle of Philanthropy reported last month. That report shows the Salvation Army down 8.4 percent nationally, a trend not seen in Dane County, where revenue from private donations and government contracts came in right at the organization's 2009 budget of some $4.6 million, Moore says.

National predictions for 2010 are a mixed bag.

The Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College predicted midyear, on the basis of its income and wealth index, that charitable giving would rebound from 2009 levels and rise by up to 4.5 percent. But a survey of nonprofits at midyear by GuideStar paints a bleaker picture. About 40 percent of the more than 7,000 respondents said the recession was still pushing down contributions; 63 percent, meanwhile, reported an increased demand for services.

At the Center for Nonprofits at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, executive director Jeanan Yasiri says what she's hearing anecdotally is grim. "People say they're experiencing up to 20 percent declines in what they're bringing in," she says. "Folks continue to be generous, but they are focusing more on essential needs."

Providing essential needs like housing and access to health care is part of the agenda at United Way of Dane County, which signed on sufficient pledges to forecast that it will meet its 2010 campaign goal of $16.47 million. The organization pared its goal a bit after falling short in 2009, but says it is on track to raise more money this year than last. Campaign chairman Rich Lynch of JH Findorff & Son, one of the state's biggest construction companies, credits the United Way's tight, effective structure for its success. But the workplace campaign also posted strong pledges in areas where unemployment is high, such as transportation, real estate and construction. "They really rallied this year," says Lynch.

Giving to foundations has been down nationally, but the Madison Community Foundation is seeing a recovery this year. Gifts total $7.5 million to date, compared to $4.7 million a year ago, and are expected to near $10 million by the end of the year, says President Kathleen Woit. "We're delighted to be getting so many gifts that in many cases go out to nonprofits," she says. Woit also says that capital campaigns and endowment challenges in Dane County have been proceeding well during the recession.

Beyond the vagaries of the private fundraising climate, how individual agencies fare depends on what they are doing.

The interim director of Centro Hispano, for example, which serves the area's growing Latino population, says the agency's private fundraising revenue from such major events as Fiesta Hispana and its annual banquet actually are up slightly this year. "I think a lot of our success is people having an interest in the direction the agency is going," says Kent Craig, pointing to a new emphasis on youth development programs. "We're developing strong relationships with donors; it's a lot of work."

Centro is hoping to win an additional $27,000 in funding from the city of Madison, whose Community Services Commission will
divvy up $50,000 added by the City Council to the community services budget of $6.2 million.

Funding from local government is a major source of income for many nonprofits. The Dane County Department of Human Services boosted contracts with some service providers and trimmed or eliminated contracts with others as part of its $82.71 million spending plan, up from $77.34 million in 2009. "The system was sustained very much intact," says director Lynn Green, despite the lack of the cost-of-living increases that providers inevitably say are needed just to stay even.

A nearly 60 percent increase in county funding to Catholic Charities, to $781,798, reflects a new home assistance program for disabled adults, says President Brian Cain. His agency, a nonprofit that is separate from the Diocese of Madison, has an annual operating budget of some $9 million and is doing well in raising private dollars through a campaign focusing on basic needs such as eliminating poverty and hunger. "It calls on people to look at their faith and how they can help their brothers and sisters," he says. A year-end direct mail solicitation, set to go out on Nov. 29, typically accounts for 35 percent of fundraising. "Call me back in a month," Cain says, "I'll tell you how it's going."