Gifts fall short of prerecession totals

By Erin Ailworth
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Charitable giving is up slightly this year, thanks to an improving economy and aggressive fund-raising, but overall donations are still far below prerecession levels, according to Boston-area nonprofit organizations.

Charities — from big-name groups like Combined Jewish Philanthropies to community agencies like the Women’s Lunch Place in the Back Bay — report a bump in donations as they head into the year-end fund-raising push.

The president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Barry Shrage, said efforts to reach longtime major givers pushed donations up modestly, from a low of $39.5 million in 2008 to $40 million last year. Donations could top $41 million this year, he said, still less than the $42 million raised in 2007.

But fund-raising remains a challenge for numerous nonprofits, and many said it will take time for people to be as generous as they were before the recession.

Researchers at Boston College’s Center on Wealth and Philanthropy estimated earlier this year that total US giving will range from $222 billion to $227 billion in 2010 — more than last year’s $217 billion, but down from $235 billion in 2007.

“We think that giving will be up slightly this year — 2 to 4 percent for individual giving,” said the center’s director, Paul Schervish. “But it doesn’t mean it’s anywhere near the volume previous to this recession.”

Edith Falk, chief executive of Campbell & Co., a Chicago consulting agency for nonprofits, expressed caution.

“I’m seeing really uneven patterns all across the country,” Falk said. “People at this point are kind of sitting on the fence . . . they don’t know if they want to make that gift now or hold off until next year.”

Some charities reported that donations continued to slip this year. Fund-raisers at the Salvation Army of Massachusetts said that, across the country, collections were down 8 percent last year. The organization, which collects about 40 percent of its income from gifts made in November and December, expects to kick off its annual Red Kettle campaign today.

“We really are hoping for a 3 percent increase in that Christmas kettle effort in the state,” said Major James LaBossiere of the goal to raise at least $3.5 million this season. To get a jump on donations, some of the Salvation Army’s red collection kettles went out in hard-hit communities about two weeks ago, earlier than usual.

Gifts to some nonprofit institutions are also lagging.

Donations to Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center dropped from about $60 million in fiscal 2008 to $33 million in fiscal 2010. Part of that, said senior vice president of development Kris Laping, was caused by the loss of a $15 million gift.

To make up for the loss, Beth Israel launched an annual giving program targeting former patients, and a Web campaign, GratefulNation.org, that includes a Facebook page where visitors are encouraged to share their hospital experiences and learn about fund-raising events.

“We’re just really trying to continually broaden our base,” Laping said. “Everyone is recalibrating their expectations. We can’t grow by 21 percent a year like we were doing, but any growth is considered awesome in this climate.”

Using social media has become an inexpensive, easy way for many nonprofits to raise their profiles.

Michael Durkin, president of United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, said his organization has been using Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to communicate with donors about how their dollars help agencies funded by United Way. And a United Way Web campaign at ChooseYourImpact.org makes it easier for donors to choose where
Times are a little bit better in some of these places,’” Durkin said, “so people are feeling and being a little bit more generous.’’

Fund-raisers at the local United Way said they are hopeful they can recover from a modest drop in the last fiscal year, when the group raised nearly $44.8 million, down from $46 million in the previous year.

Traditional efforts seem to be working for Horizons for Homeless Children in Roxbury. Its chief development officer, Meryl Sheriden, said word-of-mouth outreach by staff, board members, and past donors — and a high-profile campaign last year that included billboards on Interstate 93, ads on the MBTA, and radio spots on WBUR-FM — have contributed to a recent rise in donations, though it’s too early to say just how much.

Sheriden said she noticed the change. A recent breakfast drew about 1,000 attendees and raised roughly $570,000 — $30,000 more than last year, when about 900 people attended the event.

“People sponsored at higher levels, so instead of just buying 10 tickets for a table, they gave us a couple thousand dollars to buy a table,” Sheriden said, adding that more individual donors gave in smaller amounts. "We’re right on target with where we were last year.”

And even in this challenging economy, one nonprofit arts institution has tripled donations from three years ago: the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, which now has a budget of just under $4 million. Executive director Dennis Kois attributed its good fortune to aggressive efforts in recent years to strengthen the mission and personally engage donors.

“You’ve got to get out and meet people and talk about what you’re doing and get people excited. . . . It has got to be done face to face,” Kois said. He added that his job now “is to make the case that when times are tough more support is needed.”

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