

United Way goes from need focus to results focus

Two years ago, United Way of Central Iowa began requiring its member social services agencies to show evidence of progress in helping the people it serves become more self-sufficient. Here is an edited transcript of an interview on the change with Steven Chapman, president of Ruan Corp., who is chairman of the United Way board, and Shannon Cofield, president of the United Way.

Q. Can you describe the changes United Way of Central Iowa has made in awarding grants to its member agencies?

Chapman: For many years, United Way sponsored somewhere in the area of 55-plus agencies and programs across central Iowa that supported human needs. That ranged from the Y to children's youth shelters. United Way wanted to move from support to self-sufficiency. So it looked at areas that really drive self-sufficiency, and it was about education, income and health.

Obviously if an individual has more education, they have more opportunity. From an income standpoint, we want to move them to a level where they can first support themselves and their families and then move from that to the ability to buy an asset. That might be a car so they have transportation. It might be the ability to find affordable housing and make an investment. From a health standpoint, obviously if we don't have our health, we have all kinds of challenges, regardless of education or income.

We took those 50-plus agencies and we channeled them into each of those areas: Those that would be focused on education, those that would be focused on income and those that would be focused on health. We set up measurement processes. And we help them to implement processes that are measurable to the individuals that we serve.



Chapman



Cofield

Q. Did you give the agencies time to adjust to the new measurement-based model?

Cofield: Yes. We held many one-on-one meetings with agencies and our staff that first year to help them first decide where they best fit. Then we got them to commit to a focus area. Then we went back and met regarding their performance measure. For each goal, we put together a road map that is all research- and evidence-based, and then we developed our performance measures for each of the areas we were trying to gain a result for. In addition, we conducted training to teach them how to capture that data and record it.

Chapman: If there were areas that [United Way board committees, known as cabinets] thought they needed to improve, members of the cabinet would go to the agency, and they would visit with their board. The structure is very supportive to help them succeed. And I can tell you they are based on the statistics.

Q. Have any agencies said, "We don't want to do this anymore" because of the focus on measuring progress toward goals?

Cofield: Yes. We parted on good terms. They said they might be back at some point.

Chapman: A lot of people just don't want to change. And the big difference in this is discipline. It requires discipline. And you can look at that in one of two ways. Should an agency be required to be disciplined? Or is it their job just to be sure that people get their need or their support? United Way today is focused on making sure it is bringing that person to a position where they can take care of themselves.

Q. How does this affect fundraising for United Way?

Chapman: I could tell the story of need in this community without a problem, but I the thing I never could tell was what the return on investment was. Today, United Way is moving to a return-on-investment model so that all these companies and people in central Iowa, who I guarantee are probably the most caring and generous in the country, United Way can tell them what their money did.

I could tell them before it fed somebody, it gave them shelter, we've got a job-training program for them, we've got a health treatment where needed, we've got visiting nurses to care for the elderly. I could tell them all those stories. Today I can show them statistics of the improvement that is being made.

United Way is not a fundraising organization that just decides who gets what. United Way is a transformational organization. It certainly raises funds, but it is managing those funds to drive desired outcomes.

That is the story. It isn't about the money, it's about the life-changing events that take place with that money.