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Giving What You Can: A Thanksgiving Challenge

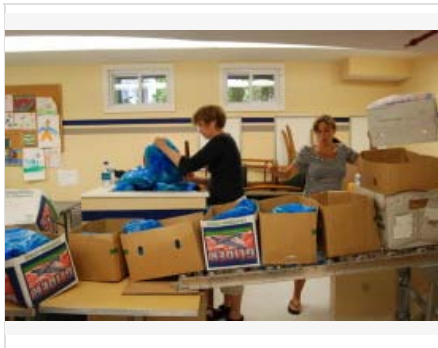
Charities need your help more than ever—take our columnist's challenge to do something to help an organization in need this holiday.

By [Heather Borden Herve](#) | [Email the author](#) | November 21, 2011

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Oh my, I just love me some turkey and stuffing, and don't stop with just one helping of sweet potatoes, I'll take two!

Isn't Thanksgiving just the best holiday of all?

As you look ahead licking your lips in gleeful anticipation to this Thursday's food and football fest, I'm going to ask you to keep in mind the *giving* part of *Thanksgiving*. And I'm going to challenge you to rise to the occasion and commit to *giving*—something, somewhere.

Because this year, perhaps more than ever, there are people in dire need. Organizations that exist to help the most needy are doing all they can, but it's becoming a lot harder for them to help.

These days, charities have to be creative to get the most bucks for the bang, as everywhere need is rising just when it's getting tougher to raise funds to help those in need. There's more competition for donations between aid organizations but there's less funding to go around, thanks to a nose-diving economy and other factors.

Charities are scrambling to make it through the harder times.

I'm a board member of a Wilton, CT organization that just kicked off its annual fundraising campaign. At our recent meeting all the members sat together signing solicitation letters to potential donors, and someone said, "You know, I just got three letters exactly like this from other groups today in the mail. People's mailboxes are already filling up with requests to give."

It got me thinking about what the landscape is for charities in our area this year. When times are tough, charities depend even more on financial donations. But it's exactly when times are tough that it may not be as easy for donors to give.

We face that decision-making challenge in our own home; after my husband [lost his job last year](#), we became much more conscious about how much and when we could still give—although it was always important to figure out how we could continue to give, albeit on a smaller scale.

The need is clearly there, according to Christina Rohatynskij, executive director of the [Food Bank for Westchester](#). “We distributed seven million pounds of food this past year, which was a one million pound increase over the year before. The figures are all higher than what they were last year. So yes, the need is up. Nothing’s moving, people are not getting jobs, there’s no action and folks are just hanging on by their fingernails.”

Rohatynskij is matter-of-fact about going up against other needy charities for donations. “In Westchester there are some 1,500 non-profits—large, small and in between. All good causes, and yes we are all competing for the same dollar.”

Kate Lombardo finds herself in the same boat as the executive director of [The Food Bank of Lower Fairfield County](#). “I worked on Wall Street and thought that was competitive; I didn’t see real competition until I came to the non-profit sector.”

In fact, the Wall Street factor is something that affects charities based in Westchester and Fairfield counties particularly hard, according to Lombardo.

“About five percent of the nation depends on Wall Street as their primary source of income. Here in Fairfield County, 12 percent depends on it. So when Wall Street sneezes, and the rest of the country feels a breeze, here we get pneumonia. When Wall Street falls, the first thing people with money are going to do is look where to cut—my lawn guy goes; I don’t get my nails done; the trickle-down effect occurs, and the poorest of poor get hurt first. Things are occurring here that were not occurring 10 years ago. The chronically poor, they needed services 10 years ago, they will always need services. Now we have more people who need these services.”

The economic downturn impacts how volunteers are able to help as well, and charities have had to adjust their priorities. Lombardo explains: “We’ve had to change our strategic tactics to get services met—at how we acquire food, maintain food and move food. We were lucky to get money donated for a refrigerated van to help transport food because now our volunteers are looking at their gas mileage and the wear and tear on their car—that wasn’t so important five or six years ago. Now it’s important.”

For an organization like a food bank, says Rohatynskij, that means making do with less. “I haven’t heard our member agencies saying that they’re turning away people, but they may be giving out smaller amounts of food, or they may not be distributing as often. They’re doing little things to try to stretch what they have a little further.”

Compounding a bad economy, donations are also down due to Hurricane Irene and the pre-Halloween snowstorm. “In two months people had to replace their food, some two times, because of power outages. So now we’re not only asking people who have been burdened twice to replenish their own households and to buy for others,” says Lombardo.

[Operation Hope](#) is a Fairfield, CT-based organization that works to end hunger and homelessness with shelters, a food pantry and community kitchen, affordable housing and collaborative social programs. Executive director Carla Miklos says she faces similar challenges just as funding from the state and federal government—which typically provided two-thirds of her funding—has been drastically reduced.

“We have a certain amount of money that we rely on from the state, and that money is more at risk now than ever. It’s been reduced a small percentage every year over the last few years that starts to really add up over time. And we do receive some money from the federal government, but the amount of money we get does not keep up with the expenses and the increased costs.”

The cuts put Miklos in a unique catch-22: “I [can’t afford to have] a development director or a grants writer. We don’t have the funding to get the personnel to help us get more funding.”

Some charities make a conscious decision to stay small to keep costs down. This relieves the pressure to fundraise as much, but the downside is they help fewer people. It’s a Faustian choice that Pam Koner made, as founder of [Family-to-Family](#), a poverty-relief organization based in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY.

“That’s the conundrum: On the one hand do we really need to be bigger? Why? Only because it would be wonderful to feed more people. But what happens when you grow that way, is that you start having to worry much more about being a fundraiser.”

Rather than focus on asking donors directly for money, Koner made the decision to keep the organization smaller and just do modified events like clothing swaps, elementary school canned food drives, and a used-Croc shoe collection to donate to a New Mexico Navajo community.

“The events cost us nothing, but they enable us to gather resources to donate directly to those in need. But it’s definitely on a smaller scale: if we wanted to do 20 Croc shoe drives or 50 school can drives, if we want to expand, then we would need more funding. But it’s what makes us great, we’re a small, tenacious non-profit running on next to nothing” said Koner.

Being smaller sometimes benefits an organization that has a very targeted niche, like Bridgeport, CT-based [Rise and Walk Foundation](#), an organization that helps very poor children and their families living in extreme poverty in Bogota, Columbia. Ellen Nardelli, the foundation’s events coordinator and a board member, says she became passionately involved because the group has a profound effect on a very specific needy population.

“I’m just a retired rectory worker, so I’m not a wealthy person. My husband died a few years ago, and I found myself with a lot of time on my hands, and I said, ‘What am I going to do?’ I heard about this foundation, I said, ‘Man, that sounds really great!’ I never thought in my 60s I’d be flying to Bogota, Columbia—I’ve been there six times now. We’re working on grants, trying to get some corporate funding. Every little bit helps, we don’t turn away five dollars!”

Nardelli says that it may be when the need all around is greatest that people find the motivation to dig deeper to give. "I could understand some people may not want to give when they are having financial problems, but I also think that when the economy is bad, any of us that have some means think more about the needy at that time."

That's the kind of message I hope you'll carry with you as you head to your Thanksgiving meals or start to write up your holiday season gift-giving lists: *Now is the time people could use your help the most, even when it's harder for you to give.*

That's when you can really make the most impact—for someone else, and for your own heart and soul.

So take my challenge: find unique, personal ways to give, when you thought you couldn't possibly give anymore. Share your stories in the comments or by [emailing me](#). I'll let you know what my family does over the Thanksgiving holiday as well. And hopefully we'll inspire others to give too.

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