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## Campaign hits goal, but it's not over yet

**Pledges needed; will be collected until Feb. 20**

**BY LARRY GIERER**  
Staff Writer

Jeff Koehler applauded an e-mail he received Friday morning.

Since 1976, the Stewart Community Home has provided a safe haven for the homeless and disabled.

Koehler, its executive director, says without the help of the United Way, "we probably couldn't survive." The message told of a successful fundraising campaign, one that has surpassed its goal.

"It's great news," Koehler said, upon getting the word that this year's United Way drive, with a goal of \$6.4 million, already has \$6,461,602 pledged.

"United Way provides about 25-30 percent of our budget," he said of his 72-bed facility. "That money is primarily used for providing important life skills."

United Way funds 50 programs in 22 agencies, including the Second Harvest Food Bank, Homeless Resource Network, Hope Harbour and Easter Seals of West Georgia.

While elated with the present results, United Way President Guy Sims said that pledges are still needed and will be collected until the final report day of Feb. 20.

"We always felt confident about reaching our goal," Sims said, "but there is really never enough money to adequately fund all of the needs here that are constantly growing. Every year, there are more requests for help from agencies trying to make a difference and improve people's lives."

Sims said that in "no way" does the goal number represent the amount needed. It is simply a number felt reachable after conferring with more than 100 CEOs projecting what their corporate and employee gifts might produce. Last year, \$6.3 million was pledged.

And though United Way has passed the goal in pledges, that doesn't mean the organization can count on all of the funds.

"Historically," Sims said, "we figure that we won't collect about half a million of the total. It's not bad faith pledges, it's just changes in the workplace. Companies will close or lay off a large number of workers. We've always been able to fund the agencies the money we allocated to them, but we want to pledge it safe."

All of the money collected, he said, goes to good use. Besides the main agencies, there are Community Partnership Grants that are given and those might see some extra help. Also, United Way is beginning to build a reserve fund for use in emergencies.

"It's something we've always wanted to do," he said. "Take some money and put it aside."

Sims said that people need to keep contributing. He called the Columbus area a "very caring community" and that, per capita, there's not another Georgia city which contributes more. All of the funds are used locally.

As for the campaign's success, Sims said, "the economy is good and our staff and loaned executives -- we had 28 instead of the usual 14 -- have really worked hard. The agencies we give the money to are held accountable for how it is spent and I think our success shows people here have confidence and trust in their United Way."

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