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Contact: Women's Fund El Dorado
530-622-5621

Experts Address Nonprofit Needs at Women's Fund Forum

What do El Dorado County nonprofits need in order to survive and thrive in today's challenging environment? While financial support is an obvious answer—one noted by 75 percent of local nonprofits surveyed by Women's Fund El Dorado (WFED)—panelists at its annual Community Needs Forum on Jan. 21 advanced a variety of additional suggestions.

The event, held at the Cameron Park Community Center, was attended by more than 200 and featured a discussion by a panel of experts from local nonprofits: David Ashby, director of New Morning Youth and Family Services; Brenda Frachiseur, director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Dorado County; Matt Williams, client services coordinator for The Center for Violence Free Relationship; Scott Thurmond, consultant/homeless coordinator, the Continuum of Care, El Dorado County; and Ashlie Bryant, cofounder and president, 3Strands Global, an anti-trafficking organization.

Jennifer Sands, chair of the WFED Education Committee, opened the evening's program then turned it over to Cathy Bean, WFED cabinet chair, who introduced the panel. Attorney Paul Zappettini, a board member of the El Dorado Community Foundation, WFED's fiscal agent, served as moderator. He lauded WFED's "power of the purse," which has resulted in more than \$350,000 in grants to local nonprofits since the organization was founded in 2007.

This year's forum was redesigned to reflect changes in WFED's granting process which, as the result of a June membership survey, has been broadened to allow more nonprofits to apply. Rather than addressing a specific community issue as in years past, the forum took an overall look at nonprofits' needs and challenges.

Collaboration among agencies was a recurring theme Thursday evening. “Collaboration is huge,” Frachiseur noted, explaining that at the same time, such joint efforts must fulfill a real need, be practical and avoid duplication. There are 487 nonprofits in El Dorado County, 401 of them on the west slope, all vying for the same dollars.

Human resources is a large expense for nonprofits, so a sort of nonprofit “Angie’s List” was suggested by Ashby. “We need expertise...for example, an attorney, or someone who understands accounting software. It would be ideal if we could create a resource base of volunteers with specific technical skills” willing to serve the nonprofit community.

Williams noted that grants are becoming larger, but fewer—and much more competitive. This is particularly challenging for rural communities like El Dorado County. “Looking at federal and state funding sources, most focus on urban areas,” Thurmond pointed out. The county’s rural nature also makes transportation more of an issue both for organizations and those they benefit.

Then there is that constant expense, overhead, which is not usually covered by grant funding. Establishing a reliable, steady income stream is a huge challenge, and Bryant suggested a membership model as one way to “help make budget dips and gaps smooth out” and counter the cyclical nature of funding. Other ways include professional fundraisers and special events; the latter take time to get established and are extremely labor intensive.

Thurmond counsels nonprofits in rural areas to be especially creative in their approach. He encourages them to keep a healthy reserve and consider putting resources toward areas such as volunteer engagement. “Often volunteers become donors,” he pointed out.

Other points raised included the need for dedicated board and committee members, for a sort of clearinghouse for fundraising events and for multi-year grants to allow programs to develop fully. While online crowdfunding may seem like an ideal way to generate revenue, it is a highly competitive field that requires a great deal of energy and may not be sustainable.

As it prepares to grant \$60,000 to nonprofits in the 2016 granting cycle, which begins Feb. 8, Women’s Fund El Dorado is a major philanthropic force on the west slope. “Your impact as a funder is huge,” Bryant told the audience. “You have a huge opportunity to impact El Dorado County and beyond.”

Women’s Fund El Dorado, a fund of the El Dorado Community Foundation, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) collective giving organization that is open to all for a donation of \$200 a year or more. Funds collected are pooled and leveraged in the form of grants, voted on by members, which support community philanthropy to enhance the quality of life on the western

slope of El Dorado County. For details, visit womensfundeldorado.org.

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