

SPOTLIGHT

Nonprofits look to local government funds, their own efforts to maintain services

By Marian Accardi Staff Writer Sep 5, 2017 Updated 8 hrs ago



Alisha Ricketts puts a serving of meatloaf in each of the Friday dinners at the Meals on Wheels & More kitchen in Decatur.

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Cindy Anderson, whose nonprofit agency operates the Meals on Wheels & More program, may face some tough choices as donations have slipped amid cuts in local government funding.

She's not alone. Many area nonprofits are scrambling.

"We maintain 325 clients and, as people leave the program, we can pull others from our waiting list," said Anderson, the director of community services with the Community Action Partnership of North Alabama. "But if our funding continues to go down, we'll have no choice but to reduce the number of clients we serve. Over the last couple of years, giving has been down."

Anderson said churches, individuals and civic groups contributed \$86,853 to Meals on Wheels' current \$299,000 budget. "We have so many great agencies in our community, and there's only so much money to go around," she said. A fundraiser sponsored by The Decatur Daily raised about \$34,000.

Added to the challenge of slipping donations, Meals on Wheels & More, which delivers free meals and milk to homebound clients each weekday in Decatur and Hartselle, was one of 11 nonprofits whose funding would be eliminated in Morgan County's budget proposal for fiscal 2018. To accommodate a raise for Morgan County workers and eliminate a budget deficit, the latest version of the budget also includes cuts to outside agencies, including several nonprofits.

Twenty-eight organizations also have turned to the city of Decatur, asking for \$2.6 million in funding, but a preliminary 2018 budget from Mayor Tab Bowling shows the city giving \$2.35 million. Meals on Wheels received \$15,808 from Decatur for the current fiscal year and is requesting \$20,000 for the upcoming year.

The Limestone County Commission in July heard funding requests from a dozen nonprofits asking for about \$400,000, according to figures from the commission office, and those agencies received about \$240,000 for the current budget year.

"Our nonprofits do a great job, but unfortunately there's just not enough money to go around" to fill all the funding requests, Limestone County Commission Chairman Mark Yarbrough said.

Although the 2018 budget is still a working draft, Yarbrough expects it will include level funding for some nonprofits, and cuts for others. A budget is expected to be considered at the commission's regular meeting Sept. 18. A work session for the Athens City Council's budget hearing has been tentatively scheduled for Sept. 13.

"We probably will take up (outside agency requests) in October," Athens Mayor Ronnie Marks said.

United Way's goal for its 2017 campaign was about \$1.9 million, while about \$1.8 million was raised, said Kathleen Ross, the agency's president and CEO. "Some cost-savings were put in place, so the impact was not felt as strongly," said Ross, who attributes the decline, in part, to economic and political uncertainty last year. "A number of organizations said they felt the same thing."

She does feel optimistic about the upcoming campaign, which kicks off with the Day of Caring on Sept. 12, with a goal of \$1.925 million.

"I truly believe — this is not just a hope — that this will be our best campaign ever," Ross said.

The United Way has 29 agency partners that provide 31 services.

"Another reason why we're looking to this year to be a phenomenal year is because we know other sources of funding are struggling," Ross said. She doesn't want a lack of funds to cause agencies to have to cut back on their services.

Agencies are trying to step up their fundraising efforts to maintain and grow their services.

Bill Giguere, development officer with the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama, said the center, like other nonprofits, is looking for ways to generate more revenue. Fundraisers and donations bring in about 3 percent of the center's operation costs, he said, with four fundraisers this year — from a golf tournament to a barbecue — generating about \$24,000.

But Giguere asked the Decatur City Council last week to restore some amount of funding to help the center provide services to indigent Decatur residents who have diagnosed serious mental illnesses. The city's previous appropriation of \$27,120 to the center was discontinued in 2013. The center, which provides services in Lawrence, Limestone and Morgan counties, is requesting funding from all three counties and four city governments in its service area, Giguere said.

Local government funding makes up 1.6 percent of the center's \$8.2 million budget, but it helps support services "for people that would otherwise have a hard time accessing services," he said. Those services can help keep those with mental illnesses out of jails, hospitals and homelessness, he said.

Donations to the Athens-Limestone Public Library are now at a lower level than during the years of a capital campaign that was launched to build the new library, said Debbie Joyner, the development director for the ALPL Foundation. But, contributions are significantly higher than before the capital campaign publicly launched in 2010, she said.

"People gave once-in-a-lifetime kind of contributions during the capital campaign. They're still contributing, but not at the same level as they were to get the library built," Joyner said.

"With funds raised year-to-date and grants pledged to be paid before year-end, the foundation anticipates raising in the range of \$225,000 to \$250,000 in 2017," Joyner added. Most of that money is designated to develop an outdoor classroom on property next to the library and to continue to pay principal and interest on the outstanding construction loan for the new building, she said.

The library has requested \$145,000 each from Athens and Limestone County for the upcoming fiscal year, while the current year's appropriations from those governments were \$130,000 and \$80,000, respectively. The library depends on government funding to cover basic operational expenses, Joyner said.

"Money from appropriations is what keeps the lights on and the employees paid," she said.

Melanie Newton, the executive director of Athens Main Street since November, said memberships in the organization have increased by 20 percent and fundraisers over the last year have been successful.

"That's definitely helped our bottom line," she said. "I have three more new events that are in the works that I hope will help."

Newton has asked for \$25,000 from Limestone County and \$27,500 from Athens for fiscal 2018.

"If we lost our city or county funds for the next fiscal year, it would be a big blow to our organization," she said. "Our board and I have a goal to launch a capital campaign to build our private funding so if we were to lose public funding, it would not be as devastating. I think it will take us a couple of years, at least, to reach that goal."

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