How to Benefit The Community Through Charitable Giving

Interview with Anahaita Kotval, Chief Executive Officer, Lifting Up Westchester

Charitable giving is a part of Affinity’s DNA. The Affinity Federal Credit Union Foundation is committed to helping vulnerable individuals in the communities where Affinity operates, both through direct participation and through funding and partnerships with other non-profit organizations. One such organization, Lifting Up Westchester, aims to provide food, shelter and support to at-risk residents of Westchester County, New York. In a recent interview, we sat down with Lifting Up Westchester’s Chief Executive Officer, Anahaita Kotval, to discover how the non-profit makes a positive impact in the lives of local people.

What motivated you to become involved in Lifting Up Westchester?
I volunteered in a soup kitchen in law school and it made quite an impression on me. I don’t think I realized until that point how thin the line is between those of us who find themselves in a position of needing a shelter or a soup kitchen and those of us who don’t. Throughout my career, I volunteered with and served on the Boards of a number of wonderful non-profits that served low-income individuals. When my children went off to college, I decided to make that my profession. I was always disturbed by the sight of people sleeping in the streets - as if society had abandoned them. So I chose homelessness as my area of focus.

After working for a non-profit in Stamford, CT that served the homeless, I started working with Lifting Up Westchester two years ago and I love it. I’m serving in the community where I grew up, and the organization is not “one size fits all.” It has a wide range of programs tailored to individual needs.

We offer meals, shelter, housing stabilization assistance, access to employment opportunities and programs for young children who are living in shelters to ensure their futures are different from their parents. We’re willing to look at the whole person and give people what they actually need. I think of shelters and soup kitchens as incredibly important, but they are
temporary solutions. We are trying to provide a permanent, holistic solution to stabilize individuals for the long term rather than only responding to the immediate crisis. By the time you’re homeless, you’ve lost all other means of support. Our job is to provide that support to get them back on their feet.

**What impact does Lifting Up Westchester have on the community?**

First, the impact on the individual who is homeless is huge. If a person is living in a stable situation, they can focus on enhancing their lives, whether that’s finding a home, a job, or reconnecting with family, which is always transformational.

Second, healthy communities value taking care of ALL their residents instead of turning their backs on one entire segment of society. Finally, it costs our community less to help people improve their lives than it does to provide the costly temporary solutions of shelters, soup kitchens etc.

The average cost to a community of providing services to a homeless individual (shelter, police involvement, emergency room visits) has been estimated by studies at $45,000 to $85,000 per year depending on the person’s level of need and the locale. Providing that individual with financial and case management support so that they can live on their own reduced that cost to $25,000-$40,000 per year.

Additionally, the community’s economic and social health improves. Economically, property values increase and the community is more attractive to businesses and consumers, resulting in more jobs. Ultimately, everyone has a better life as a result.

**Lifting Up Westchester recently received a grant from the Affinity Foundation to support the Pathways to Self Sufficiency program, which operates a three-pronged approach: Housing retention support, vocational training, and life skills training. How do these three areas work together to help individuals transition out of homelessness?**

If you are not stably housed, it is very difficult to hold down a steady job, maintain your health or improve your prospects in any way. When our clients leave our shelters most still live on shoe-string budgets making it extremely challenging to keep their housing.

It’s hard to live within your budget if you’re not aware of the resources available to you or you aren’t skilled in utilizing those resources. For example, residents need to know how to supplement their food stamps with visits to their local food pantry or food bank. Residents need life skills to learn how to manage, be proactive and navigate this complex system of resources, so that they can maintain their housing. They also need to learn how to make economic but nutritious meals, maintain their apartments and manage their relationships with their landlords and neighbors. The Pathways Program provides Life Skills training on these
issues while the clients are staying in our shelters and a Housing Retention Case Manager to work with those transitioning out of shelter while they are acclimatizing to living on their own.

Even with these critical skills, most of our clients need to supplement their public benefits with earned income in order to hold on to their hard won housing. If an individual is not building their income through a steady job, they are at risk of becoming economically vulnerable. We as a community need to move out of the mindset that our clients cannot contribute to a work environment and provide training for entry-level positions or jobs with low skill requirements. Working can help build self-esteem, create social connections, and improve mental health, as well. Pathways places an Employment Counselor in each shelter to assist residents with job search.

All three areas work together because housing is the foundation that provides stability to build other skills.

**What is one thing you would like the community to know about Lifting Up Westchester?**

Every year, we have hundreds of homeless clients in Westchester County who are living independently and successfully because they received the right level of support. It can be done.

**How can Affinity members volunteer with your organization throughout the year?**

We have volunteer opportunities for different levels of involvement – so it depends on how hands on you want to be. We have groups who will organize food drives, bedding drives, toy drives at the end of the year for homeless kids, backpack drives and collect swim suits for summer camp.

We also have groups who do a one-day activity: you can organize an activity for our clients, such as a soccer tournament, or teach the kids something you’re skilled in. Some groups do landscaping, painting, decorating the community room and serving a meal at the shelter or soup kitchen.

Other individuals and groups will come once a month to help residents with résumé writing, interview skills, mock interviews for individuals looking for work, and to teach them about budgeting and finance.

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