

Op-Ed 2013

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UNITED WAY OFFERS WINDOW TO COMMUNITY ISSUES THROUGH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many people know about United Way, but a few community members have had the opportunity to be part of their work through the Loaned Executive (LE) Professional Development Program which offers an opportunity to gain skills while learning about community issues. I'm one of those lucky individuals whose workplace allowed me to participate in this year's LE Program, and was truly inspired by what I learned. I coordinated with nearly 30 businesses and spoke at over 20 events. One thing is certain, I have gotten significantly more out of this experience than I expected when I took the opportunity.

The LE program starts with a full week of training, no small effort on the part of the United Way staff to give us the information to speak on behalf of United Way, and get excited about it too! There were three things I didn't know about how United Way is involved year round in our community. Firstly, their Fund Distribution Committee is local volunteers with a passion for making an impact, volunteering their time, and working diligently to allocate donated dollars. Secondly, they hold monthly meetings with partner agencies to check in on the programs, get updates, and discuss program status. Thirdly, how committed United Way is to developing pilot programs to get in front of problems, including the school readiness program with the Ferndale School District.

The part of the training that impacted me the most was site visits. We took tours of United Way funded programs, talked to employees and volunteers about their work, and heard from beneficiaries of the services. I learned about how Bellingham Childcare and Learning Center is preparing children for kindergarten; how homeless youth are transitioning into stable living through Northwest Youth Services; how the YWCA is helping women find stable housing and employment; and how Brigid Collins is making strides to end child abuse, just to name a few. One of the statements I heard repeatedly was how these agencies are working together as a network to make a collective impact in our community, which is why United Way works with a variety of agencies and programs to achieve results.

The program helped me build many new skills, but public speaking is my area of greatest improvement. United Way provided me with training and information which made a big difference in what I expected of myself when speaking to large groups. It was made easier by having a subject matter that spoke to my heart and I wanted to share!

United Way's work and the process by which they achieve results is complex, and being able to distill these ideas and communicate them to a variety of individuals is a skill I will use in the future.

Loaning an employee is a commitment, but is well worth it. I'm proud to say that Anvil is so committed to making a difference that they would donate 20 hours a week of my time. This promotes a positive image of Anvil and by being aware of the issues in our community, how individuals and non-profits are working together with United Way, made me a stronger community member. Connecting individuals to their community, and becoming passionate about local issues, will keep employees and their jobs in Whatcom County. The increased awareness of local issues and professional skills I have developed have helped me grow and I will take that back to work with me, making me a better employee.

Any company can benefit by sending an employee through this program, and I would encourage companies to consider candidates for this unique opportunity. I am very thankful to Anvil that they allowed me to take part in this program, and hope that local companies continue to support United Way in this capacity.

I would like to invite you to give to this year's United Way Campaign. I have seen first-hand the lives changes, the dedicated non-profit staff, and the research that United Way is investing in advancing Education, Income, and Health. These are complex issues that take multiple organizations working on a variety of aspects to ensure change, and United Way is a key player in creating a stronger community. That's what it means to LIVE UNITED!

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About the Author

Elizabeth Sowers is a Civil/Structural Engineer at Anvil Corporation. She was selected by her employer for the 4 month Loaned Executive Professional Development Program with United Way of Whatcom County. United Way of Whatcom County runs 150 workplace giving campaigns during the fall to benefit Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund, which focuses on advancing education, income, and health. For more information about conducting a United Way workplace campaign or participating in the LE program, contact Kristi Birkeland at 360-733-8670. For more information or to make your donation to United Way of Whatcom County, go online at unitedwaywhatcom.org

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