

United Way, county launch Get Connected

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Wednesday, October 28, 2015 10:02 am

An online volunteer platform designed as a link between Jefferson County nonprofit organizations, agencies and communities and potential volunteers has been launched through a partnership between Jefferson County and the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties.

Called Get Connected, the website, www.volunteermain.com, will allow for local agencies and organizations to post any volunteer needs they have and promote any fundraisers and/or events they are hosting.

“United Way stands for give, advocate and volunteer,” said United Way executive director Megan Findlay. “I think the volunteer part was where we were really missing the mark a little bit or where we didn’t have as much focus on the other two.”

One of the biggest challenges for area nonprofit organizations and communities is the struggle to find more volunteers.

Often, she fields calls from potential supporters or community members who say they want to get involved with United Way but are not in a position to do so financially and want to know how else they can get involved.

“This is going to be our answer to that question now,” Findlay said. “We’re excited because there really isn’t that one spot right now for people to go to learn how they can get involved in the community. We feel Get Connected is an incredible tool to fill that void.”

She said the county recognized the void and also considered the benefit of the platform to all communities and decided to support the project.

“We are grateful for the partnership and feel it will only increase the overall success and impact of the site,” she said.



Megan Findlay

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Findlay presented the “official” launch of the site to the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors at its meeting Tuesday. Additional promotion of the site will be ongoing to local organizations, businesses and community members in the next week and thereafter.

The site already is active, so Findlay encouraged area residents to visit www.volunteermain.com to review its benefits and tools, and register to start their community engagement process.

Jefferson County once had a volunteer coordinator position, which ultimately was lost due to budget cuts. County officials view the partnership in supporting this platform as a way to help fill that void, Findlay said.

“County departments also struggle to get word out about events or fundraisers and getting people involved,” Findlay said.

Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said the website will elevate the capacity of local organizations and programs needing critical one-time or ongoing additional support.

“We are particularly impressed with this platform’s ability to facilitate corporate volunteerism and empowering tomorrow’s leaders to become more well-rounded individuals through volunteering,” he said. “Launching the tool throughout the greater Jefferson County area will hopefully recruit more volunteers and organizations alike.”

Among the potential uses for the site from the county’s perspective would be to assist in organizing volunteers in the event of a disaster response. Communities across the county struggled with that during the 2008 flood.

“A really great tool that this site has is that it will become the one place to come and go to for people to learn how they can help if we are ever in a position like that again,” Findlay said.

Meanwhile, Jefferson County Parks Department Director Joe Nehmer said Get Connected has the potential to create exciting opportunities for the department and allow people to a menu of options to volunteer for.

“Hopefully, it will allow us an opportunity to better coordinate and better participate with volunteers from throughout the community,” he said. “While we certainly celebrate and definitely value the many volunteers that help us out, at times we acknowledge that we struggle in coordinating them.”

Nehmer noted that lack of coordination does cause some concern because the county does not want to appear disrespectful.

“We need to have the volunteers in order to have the park system function as efficiently as possible and I’m hoping the new site can help us in that effort,” he said.

Although sponsored by United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties and Jefferson County, the resource will be available to any local organization and all area residents, not just those associated with the sponsoring organizations.

“The overall goal is for www.volunteermain.com to become the main source for volunteer opportunities within Jefferson County and Whitewater,” Findlay said.

She said the volunteer aspect of United Way was one of her primary focuses when she was hired two years ago.

“That is really where my nonprofit background came from before I started in this position,” Findlay said.

A Fort Atkinson resident and a 2003 graduate of Fort Atkinson High School, Findlay graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in 2007 with a bachelor’s degree in business administration in operations management.

She spent five years working as a sales/brand manager for an international textile company based in the greater Chicago area. During that time, she also served as president of a young professionals’ board for a literacy nonprofit, Working in the Schools (WITS).

About a year-and-a-half ago, Get Connected reached out to her with information on the new platform. She instantly was excited about the prospects of the program because the platform is very user friendly and very interactive.

However, financially, United Way was not in a position to support moving forward with such a project.

“It is something we wanted to make an initiative, but at the same time, we didn’t want to hurt funding we give to the current organizations and groups we support,” she said.

When fundraising in 2014 exceeded the campaign goal, Findlay advised the United Way board that moving forward with the Get Connected site was the right thing to do and the board agreed.

Cost for the platform included a one-time implementation for setup and then an ongoing hosting fee. United Way also budgeted some marketing dollars for it to spread the word to area residents about use of the tool.

Initial cost for installation, annual hosting cost and marketing was \$2,750. Jefferson County contributed \$1,500 toward the first-year costs and marketing efforts.

“There is the understanding that some people will say, ‘well, we already posted on our Facebook page or on our website and now it’s just one more place to have to do it,’” she said. “We understand that it might just seem like one extra thing.”

However, she pointed out, the hope is www.volunteermain.com will become the spot to list a need for volunteers.

“It is the understanding for the organizational perspective that community members need this one spot to go,” Findlay said.

More and more over the past eight months, Findlay said, she has seen a desire from people wanting to get involved and learning more about what the organizations and agencies are doing in the community.

“This tool has such incredible potential to be an amazing community resource and provide a lot of connections we’ve been missing,” she said.

The site is public and open to all users. Profiles can be set-up to allow for notifications based on preferred interests as events are loaded onto the site.

Also, Findlay said there is a number of filters for searching opportunities and users can search by commitment level, specific organizations, cause.

“Users can personalize it so much to line up what they want to do and what opportunities they are interested in,” she said.

The United Way director also is excited about the reporting tools featured on the site.

Personal users and organizations will have chance to look up the records of their volunteer hours and break it down to determine the dollar value of those hours.

“There is a lot of potential and the opportunity for it to be a really impactful tool for us,” Findlay said.

More information will be sent out to the organizations and will do another push in early 2016.

The United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties supports 32 local agencies that provide critical health and human services to those in need. This network of helping services can be described as a “safety net” for those in need.

Whether it is transitional housing, literacy education, after-school programs and education, health and dental care, end-of-life care, mentoring programs, job training or disaster relief, the United Way identifies the greatest needs in the community and helps to fund agencies that can meet those needs.

For more information about the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties and its mission or the Get Connected platform, call Megan Findlay at (920) 563-8880 or visit www.ourunitedway.com or on Facebook at “United Way of Jefferson & North Walworth Counties.”