

UNITED WAY

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Hope member Doug Meredith said of the center, "We give support to each other."

Among the programs United Way funds at Hope are those aimed at decreasing obesity in the most at-risk groups, which includes individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities. Among those helped by those programs is Jessica Rogers. She came to Hope overweight and shy and said, without the center, she'd probably be at home sitting on the couch watching television all day. Instead she's a member of the Wellness Club, is on the center's basketball team, the Hope Hoopsters, and is a huge fan of the dance exercise class. She's also been the co-host of the center's "Not-So Late Show," an annual fundraiser showcasing the members' talents and abilities.

"I lost 100 pounds and I'm talking more," she said.

Hope Program Facilitator Katie O'Hotzke said the wellness club is helping many of its members take strides forward toward a healthier life. In addition to getting members to be more physically active, she said, the programs also are getting them to think about what they put into their bodies and how better nutrition can help them.

She said it's all done through the use of positive encouragement.

"We're like a family here," she said.

The United Way also funds Getting Ahead, a program at the Community Action Agency (CAA) in Adrian that helps people in need of self-sufficiency skills. CAA's Lenawee County director, Burt Fenby, said the program provides a learning environment and experience where adults can examine their lives, investigate new information critical to addressing poverty issues, assess personal and other resources, and discover how to overcome their challenges.

"We want to help them rewrite their stories," Fenby said of program participants, who come with different challenges and barriers. "It's about helping them to build the lives they want."

The program meets every Tuesday for nearly three hours over the course of 16 weeks. Participants go through a series of classes and work through self-identified issue areas to achieving self-sufficiency.

Melissa Dunbar of Adrian, a graduate of the program, is now co-facilitating a new group of individuals wanting to get ahead.

Prior to coming to the CAA, she was facing challenges, beginning with having a baby at age 18 while living in a women's shelter. Many times, she said, she felt hopeless and stuck in a low place. But she found help, she said, and through the programs and classes at the CAA began rebuilding her life to where she now owns her own home and cleaning business.

"There is support out there to help you get back on track," Dunbar said. "That's what Getting Ahead and the CAA helped me to learn."

To support early childhood education, the United Way gives nearly \$20,000 to the 3-year-old program at Adrian Community Preschool. The preschool, with an annual budget of \$100,000 and paid staff of three, serves disadvantaged and special needs children. The United Way funding allows the 3-year-old program to be free to those who qualify.

"It's huge what they do for us," said Adrian Community Preschool Director Kristen Howard. "Without them we wouldn't be able to offer a free 3-year-old program."

The preschool works each day for students to learn everything, from literacy to social interactions, in a quality environment, Howard said. The preschool recently received the highest rating by Great Start to Quality, which is Michigan's quality rating system for early childhood programs.

"The 3-year-old program is key in helping children take off in the 4-year-old program," said Howard.

Lenawee United Way does not give these funds and then turn away. As a result of United Way officials in New York City, Washington, D.C. and most recently, with the United Way of the Brazos Valley in Texas allegedly misusing funds or being mixed-up in accounting irregularities, local officials have set strict goals for programs it funds, with success measured every six months. Organizations are required to submit reports documenting their progress in achieving the goals set by United Way in order to make sure the donations are working.

In addition, Lenawee United Way has kept its combined administrative and fundraising expenses — overhead — at 13 percent. The Better Business Bureau's guidelines recommend organizations such as United Way spend no more than 35 percent of annual revenue or fundraising and no more than 50 percent on total overhead. To help keep its promise to govern itself at the highest degree of accountability and transparency and to invest its public donations into efforts getting the greatest results for individuals and families in need, United Way is offering "Life Changing Tours." Cop Valdiviez, community engagement manager for Lenawee United Way, said the tours, offered May 12 and 24 as well as June 16 and 28, offer the community the chance to see the funded organizations at work and meet those who have had their lives changed for the better.

Lenawee United Way Board Chairman Joe Williams said the idea behind the tours is to give people and donors the chance to see the positive impact, "we are making with their contributions."

"We are changing lives," Williams said.

To contact the United Way about the tour, email Roxanne@lenaweeway.org or call 263-4696.