

United Way Of Vermillion Uses Three-Pronged Approach To Serve Community

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The United Way of Vermillion’s mission is “uniting people and resources to build a stronger community,” and the organization’s executive director, Kelsey Collier-Wise, recently told Vermillion Rotarians of the methods used to reach that goal.

United Way of Vermillion is also in the midst of its annual fundraising campaign, she said, and she is often addressing various organizations to talk about the assistance United Way is able to offer individuals in the community with the help of funds it receives from local people and organizations.

“Rotary is such an amazing supporter of United Way and our programs,” Collier-Wise said. “In this room, I just see a lot of incredible, tremendous supporters of the work we do and some people that have made just an incredible impact on the United Way and on the CCC (Community Connection Center) and I’m so grateful to you for all that you have given.

“We would not be able to do the work we do quite literally without the people in this room and so I want to make sure that you know everything that we’re doing, what’s going on, and that you can ask questions,” she said. “That’s part of the reason why I’m here today.”

Collier-Wise noted that the United Way works in three different ways in Vermillion – by offering financial support to several external organizations in the community, by operating its own internal Community Impact Programs and by helping to create and maintain the many programs offered by the Community Connection Center in downtown Vermillion.

“We were founded in Vermillion in 1956, so we’re actually going to be coming up on our 70th anniversary in Vermillion and originally the United Way in Vermillion, like many United Ways around the country, was started by our Chamber of Commerce as a way to sort of put



One could only dream of how the Community Connection Center may appear when this photo of Kelsey Colier-Wise, executive director of the United Way of Vermillion was taken in March 2018 among rows of shelving that came with the purchase of the former True Value hardware store. The store building now houses the many services offered by the Community Connection Center.
David Lias/Vermillion Plain Talk

fundraising into one package because you had a lot of organizations that were all asking for money – the polio organizations, the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts – so this was a way to try and consolidate that giving,” she said.

External Organizations

The United Way of Vermillion, Collier-Wise said, still works by following a community grant model in which nonprofit organizations around the area will apply for funding in April.

“The board looks at those applications and decides what they think they can raise to be able

to support those different projects and then they get that throughout the year,” she said.

Organizations that will receive United Way community grants in 2026 are: Boys and Girls Club of Vermillion, Clay County Child Protection Team, Connecting Kids Scholarship Program, Connecting Care Childcare Fund, Waypoint Domestic Violence Shelter, Feeding Vermillion, Habitat for Humanity for Clay and Yankton Counties, Lutheran Social Services, Main Street Center, Pathways Shelter for the Homeless, Salvation Army Emergency Fund, Southeast CASA, Southeast Public Transit, Tanager Takeout, USD Scottish Rite Speech, Language and Hearing Center, USD Vucurevich Children’s Center and the Vermillion Parks and Recreation Department.

Waypost is the new name for what was known as the River City Domestic Violence Shelter in Yankton.

“We don't have a shelter here in Vermillion and so we do give some funding because they do house a number of families and individuals throughout the year from Vermillion,” Collier-Wise said, explaining why United Way of Vermillion offers support to a Yankton organization.

United Way of Vermillion also offers support to Pathways Shelter for the Homeless in Yankton. “It is the regional homeless shelter,” she said. “We don’t have a shelter here in Vermillion and we do give them some funding. They do house a number of families and individuals throughout the year from Vermillion and we want to be able to help support that.”

The other organizations have received local United Way support in recent years.

“Some of these programs we've funded for many, many years, and I think that we have a really great relationship and are really able to know the ins and outs of these organizations,” she said.

The applications that United Way of Vermillion receives from these organizations gives the United Way Board of Directors a “chance to dig into those different programs and really be able to see from year to year how effective they are, how many people they're serving and what their ideas and future plans are,” Collier-Wise said. “Those

relationships with outside organizations continue to be a really important part of what United Way does.”

Community Impact Programs

United Way of Vermillion also supports a number of internal programs that are also described as Community Impact Programs.

Imagination Library is one of the Community Impact Programs that has been around the longest in Vermillion.

“That was kind of the first program in the early 2000s that United Way took on as a program that we run,” she said. “Basically, any child ages 0 to 5 that lives in Clay County can sign up to receive a free book every month. That's a program that was founded by Dolly Parton and her foundation, the Dollywood Foundation.

“They've got experts on curriculum that figure out what books go out,” Collier-Wise said. “They do all the mailing and stuff like that and we just manage the kids that are enrolled in it.”

With a laugh, she added that her fandom of Parton is evident to anyone who visits her office.

“You'll see a lot of Dolly Parton everything. She's kind of a mascot, at least in the upstairs and if you ever are a volunteer with food recovery and come in the back door,” Collier-Wise said, “you might get scared by her because we've got a 5-foot-tall stand-up Dolly that stands at the top of the stairs and sometimes freaks people out when they come in.”

The Evan Project Diaper Bank is another Community Impact Program operated by the United Way of Vermillion.

“We’re providing diapers for about 100 babies in the Vermillion area every month,” she said.

Another on the list of the local United Way internal programs is VITA, which is the Internal Revenue Service’s Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program.

“This will be our fourth year doing VITA income tax preparation out of the Community Connection Center,” Collier-Wise said. “Last year was the first year we started working with law students to provide the services and that's been a really amazing partnership.

“They get a credit and take an actual classroom portion with the tax professor over at the law school and then they come over and do tax preparation,” she said. “Just seeing them be able to connect with community members and learn really important skills like interviewing clients and things like that has been really cool.”

A Community Impact Program known as Allen’s Bed Bank “is our bed program where we pick up and deliver beds to people,” Collier-Wise said. “One really neat thing this semester has been we’ve had volunteers from USD Rotaract who have been helping with the bed bank and they have been awesome.”

USD Rotaract is a Rotary-sponsored service organization for students and young adults focused on community service, leadership, and professional development. It works with the local Vermillion Rotary Club to make a positive impact.

“It sounds like they’ve had a good enough time that they are interested in helping in the spring,” she said. “We’re really excited about that because that is a harder one to find volunteers for.

“Not everybody can or wants to move furniture and so being able to have dependable volunteers is really important and those Rotaract volunteers have just been really enthusiastic and super dependable,” Collier-Wise said. “I’m really thankful to Tim Schorn for getting that program started at USD.”

The Peddle Pals Bike Program is also one of the local United Way’s internal programs that works in partnership with the Vermillion Police Department.

“This town has a lot of abandoned bicycles. It just happens a lot. People lock a bike to somewhere and then they just never come back for it, or it gets stolen and they never come and claim it,” she said. “After they hold it for a while, the VPD has the ability to donate those bikes to a nonprofit. We have people sign up and we’re able to get those bikes out to people that need them in the community for transportation.”

Community Connection Center

Collier-Wise described the Community Connection Center as the “third prong” of the work done by the United Way of Vermillion.

“The Community Connection Center opened in 2019 thanks to a gift from the Verne and Bonnie Anderson estate,” she said. “We were talking with a lot of our partners and one of the things that was coming up was that when people were looking for help, they were having to go to a lot of different places,” she said.

It was decided that there was a need in Vermillion “to bring everything together in one place to make things just a little bit easier for everyone,” Collier-Wise said.

Funds from the Anderson estate and other places allowed the United Way of Vermillion to purchase the building that once housed True Value Hardware in downtown Vermillion. Programs that were once scattered in different locations throughout the community are now at home in that building following its interior renovation.

“This has all come together, honestly, better than I could have anticipated and certainly better than I thought it was going to be for the first eight months,” she said. “One of the things that has just been really amazing is the level of cooperation between all of the programs.”

The Welcome Table and the Vermillion Food Bank have merged into Feeding Vermillion, which is housed in the Community Connection Center.

“That’s just been a really awesome development for the people who use those services, but also for just the efficiency of the way that everything works,” Collier-Wise said.

People are welcome to stop by the Community Connection Center and tour the building.

“We have all of our Feeding Vermillion programs there – the (Food) Pantry, the Welcome Table, Tanager Takeout and the Backpack Program,” she said. “The Salvation Army Emergency Fund has an office there four days a week in the mornings.”

The Rural Office of Community Services (ROCS) also has an outreach office in the Community Connection Center.

“They’re what’s called a community action agency and they’re based in Wagner and serve all of southeast South Dakota,” Collier-Wise said.

“They've got locations in Chamberlain, Mitchell, Yankton -- kind of all over. The office that's in the CCC specifically is an outreach office and they do a lot of programs that are federally funded grants for primarily housing, but they have a few other things. They can help with weatherization and some other things.”

The Cornerstone Career Learning Center also has a presence in the Community Connection Center.

“This is an organization that is also regional,” she said. “It's run out of Huron, but they have locations all around and they primarily focus on GED preparation and so they do a lot of their classes online, but they do need a location to be able to do intake and some testing,” she said. “Starlyn (Williams), who's their staff member out of Yankton, comes over usually every other week and does intake and testing up in our offices.”

Collier-Wise noted that every square inch of the Community Connection Center building is being put to use.

“We are always interested in what other ways and what other partnerships we can have in bringing more people into the CCC, but at this point, we are probably running out of space a little bit as far as adding new programs,” she said. “My dream right now is to -- and Jim, our maintenance supervisor is working on this -- build some loft storage so that we can free up some space downstairs.”

When the programs first moved into the 9,000 square foot building back in 2019, one could easily think that it would take forever to fill all of that space.

She jokingly compared it to moving into a larger house.

“You're like, ‘oh, I'll never use all these closets,’ and then in like three years, you're like, ‘how did we outgrow this house so quickly?’ So, we're probably not adding anything new that takes up much space anytime soon, but we do a lot of partnerships,” Collier-Wise said.