

Groups to unite under Fairfield County Community Foundation

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With hope of distributing dollars more efficiently, the Fairfield County Community Foundation has announced a merger with a similar Bridgeport-based group.

"It became quite obvious that we were doing the same things," said John Chiota, chairman of the Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation's board.

Last year, both organizations gave \$6.2 million in the Bridgeport area. Slightly more than half came from the Wilton-based Fairfield County Community Foundation, Chiota said.

"That got our attention big time," he said.

The merger goes into effect early next year, with the combined organizations retaining the Fairfield County Community Foundation name.

And as the name indicates, the merger is not a marriage of equals. As of June 2006, the Fairfield County group had \$80.4 million in net assets, twice as much as on the Bridgeport foundation's most recent financial report. The Fairfield County group also gave out considerably more grant money.

Since donors direct much of both organizations' giving, the new foundation will continue to honor those wishes, making sure the funds go where they are intended.

"We have no intention of taking our eye off of the needs in the other cities," said Michael Funck, chairman of the Fairfield County group's board. "We go where the need is and do the best we can for everyone."

News of the merger prompted concerns among Bridgeport organizations that have received grants from both foundations, Chiota said. However, local recipients of Fairfield County foundation's funds were optimistic.

Ginger Katz, founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation in Norwalk, sees an opportunity for her drug use prevention program.

"They could be very helpful in helping me expand in the Bridgeport area," she said. The most recent of her three Fairfield County foundation grants partially funded a parent education component to begin in January.

Likewise, Sandra Testani, chief executive officer of Childcare Learning Centers in Stamford, greeted news of the merger enthusiastically.

"We have a lot of needs in common with Bridgeport," she said. "It's a wonderful thing because it saves money on administrative costs."

This year, the early childhood education program has received \$80,000 from the Fairfield County group.

The merged foundation's giving power should continue to grow, Funck said. Already, the Fairfield County foundation has seen rapid expansion. In the 2006 fiscal year, its net assets grew 25 percent. He attributes this to growing awareness among donors and the success of the foundation's investments.

After the merger, the foundation expects to implement a strategic plan focusing on affordable housing and immigration, among other issues.

The Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation's Nonprofit Resource Center also would offer assistance to nonprofit agencies throughout the county, not just in the Bridgeport area. Chiota also mentioned a tentative plan for a countywide education program for school principals.

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