

United Way touts its helping hand

[By Meg Haskell](#)

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BREWER, Maine — For the thousands of Bangor-area residents who contribute to the United Way, it can be easy to lose track of just what their donations accomplish.

At the annual meeting of the United Way of Eastern Maine on Thursday night, however, about 100 United Way officials, business leaders and area social service providers reviewed some of the accomplishments of the past year and looked forward to the challenges.

The event took place at Jeff's Catering in Brewer.

United Way's status as "the largest charity in the history of the world," with more than \$4 billion raised nationwide each year, doesn't help individual donors understand the importance of the work undertaken at the local level, said keynote speaker Alex Sanchez, a senior vice president at United Way of America in Alexandria, Va.

Sanchez said United Way's specific successes in advancing the common good by promoting education, income stability and access to health care need to be clearly communicated in order to ensure the future of the organization and the service groups it funds. Fortunately, he said, most people understand the importance of lending a helping hand to those who are struggling.

"If we can't sell that, we're in the wrong line of business," Sanchez told his audience.

John Kuropchak, newly appointed president of the United Way of Eastern Maine, said the Bangor-based agency helped more than 45,000 area residents in 2008. Programs that help children succeed in school, teach parenting skills, help families and senior citizens manage their finances, steer teens away from risky behaviors, and promote independent living for the elderly have all made measurable progress, he said.

"And we're interested in results," Kuropchak said. "Donors want to see tangible results at the end of the day." Those local results include 7,000 senior citizens getting hot meals, transportation and health services. Health care and education services reached 1,678 children. And about 2,800 area residents took advantage of free tax preparation assistance last spring, resulting in more than \$2 million in returned taxes.

The 211 telephone clearinghouse for social services, supported by United Way of Eastern Maine, has fielded more than 33,000 queries in the two years since it came on line, putting callers in touch with more than 5,000 agencies.

Kuropchak has been at the helm of United Way of Eastern Maine for just four weeks, after the departure of Eric Buch. Buch resigned in April, citing personal and health reasons. Kuropchak and his wife, Sid, have bought a home in Orono.

A highlight of the evening was the short campaign film produced by WLBZ-TV 2 featuring 23-year-old Hampden resident Felicia Hatch. Hatch, who was a teenager when she dropped out of school and left home, took advantage of United Way programs to help her finish high school, get a job and find a safe place to live with her two young sons. Hatch was in the audience with Andre, now 5, and Gabriel, 1.

Former board chairman George Thomas of the Sargent Corp. in Old Town said United Way of Eastern Maine is about halfway to meeting this year's fundraising goal of \$2.7 million.

"We're a little ahead of last year's pace," he said.

Awards were presented to Thomas, the Penquis social service agency, and the Maine Community Foundation.

The annual meeting was sponsored by the law firm Rudman & Winchell and Starboard Leadership Consulting.

For information or to donate, visit the United Way online at www.unitedwayem.org.