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Rhode Islanders weather the storm

ANTHONY MAIONE

A Jan. 31 front-page article “National report finds many in Rhode Island living on the edge” told the story: Rhode Island ranks 38th in the nation in financial stability of local households. About a third of us do not have the resources to last more than three months if our income is cut off.

Since the recession took hold of our state more than four years ago, tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs and are struggling to provide for their families. This unprecedented need has stretched the state’s safety net to its limit. There is real concern that diminishing resources, coupled with increasing need and an economy slow to recover, has created the “perfect storm” in which Rhode Islanders — many for the first time — are unable to meet their most basic needs.

Managing United Way 2-1-1 in Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Emergency Food & Shelter Board, we know firsthand the depth of need in communities across the state. During the last year, 2-1-1, a 24-hour information and referral helpline that connects individuals and families with the resources they need during times of crisis, handled more than 205,000 calls. This represents a 12.5 percent increase over 2010, and a staggering 68 percent increase over just two years ago. In light of these statistics, along with those that illustrate a 168 percent increase in the number of calls for food assistance and 112 percent increase in calls for financial help with housing and utilities, United Way of Rhode Island did not want to wait any longer before taking action.

I am pleased to say that United Way of Rhode Island’s board of directors unanimously approved the release of \$1 million in funding from our Community Impact Fund to help our neighbors weather the storm of uncertainty in meeting their basic needs.

The direction and distribution of these funds will be guided by our Community Investment Advisory Committee, as it works in conjunction with United Way’s board, staff, community volunteers, and partners to identify community needs and set overall direction to create and implement impact strategies consistent with our organization’s priorities. While this funding is above and beyond our existing support allocated for 2012 in the areas of education, income, housing and safety net, it is imperative that we take steps now to ensure the short-term stability of those in need while remaining persistent in our work to create long-term solutions.

Members of the Community Investment Advisory Committee are deliberating about how to invest the funds in the community, which will be distributed to nonprofit agencies working directly with members of the community in providing basic-needs assistance. Money will be dedicated to help our struggling neighbors with such needs as food, shelter, heating assistance and other living expenses. Our plan is to distribute these funds as soon as possible.

In addition to our emergency financial commitment to help those in crisis, United Way has increased the number of 2-1-1 operators by the equivalent of two full-time employees, making it possible for this critical resource to keep up with an ever-growing call volume. We are doing all we can to be ready to help whenever our fellow Rhode Islanders call.

If you want to help, between now and March 1, we will match, dollar for dollar, all contributions to the Weathering the Storm Fund. Donations may be made online at www.uwri.org by clicking the Weathering the Storm link, or by sending a check made payable to United Way of Rhode Island. Please note that the contribution is for the Weathering the Storm Fund.

We are fortunate to be in a position to make these emergency investments that will help many from

falling deeper into crisis. It also sends a message to those struggling that they do not have to weather this storm alone. This is what we do in Rhode Island; we celebrate with one another in the good times and help each other when times are tough.

Anthony Maione is the president and chief executive of United Way of Rhode Island.