

“Stable housing allows a kid to become more successful in school, and then as we become successful homeowners, we can pass that estate down to generations as they come.”

-Pam Ottersbach
*Director
Southern Indiana for
Metro United Way*



Ottersbach leads Metro United Way's Indiana Mission

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEROD CLAPP

Like a lot of people during the pandemic, Pam Ottersbach has spent a lot of time working from home. But she still likes to roll up her sleeves and get down to business, like she did with Metro United Way's annual Build-a-Bed event on a Saturday in early December.

Ottersbach, the director of Southern Indiana for Metro United Way, said Build-a-Bed — which has provided beds for nearly 700 students in Clark, Floyd and Harrison Counties in the last five years — is just one part of what the organization does, and just part of what makes her proud to go to work every day.

"I do have the opportunity to look at the needs in our community from a very (high) viewpoint," Ottersbach said. "But then we sit down and strategize with individuals, corporations and service providers on how we start to drill that down and meet the individual needs where our community members are."

A lot of that, she said, goes down to basic needs. She said Build-a-Bed is a big part of meeting those needs. After working with school districts to find solutions to help students with academic success, Metro United Way learned many students didn't have their own bed to sleep in.

Sometimes, they were sharing one bed with other siblings and getting the bed in shifts through the week. Getting with guidance counselors revealed that need.

Community members and companies volunteer to help build the beds. Ron Zimmer, building trades instructor at Prosser, said his students put in a lot of work to help out, too. He said they worked on preparing all the lumber for simpler

assembly for the day of the event, making 4,052 cuts, drilling 6,291 holes, and milling more than 22,156 feet of edges to make the beds.

He said he was at the event to help everyone with different levels of experience understand how the beds went together, and he was glad to help Metro United Way with the project.

Ottersbach said Metro United Way has had to balance its regular programming with issues related to COVID-19, though. She said more people were in need of help, whether from losing jobs or other reasons. But that put a strain on their service partners.

"That has been a primary focus of ours, to make sure our service providers in our community have the resources that they need to keep their doors open," Ottersbach said. "They were serving individuals and families in our community that never found themselves in the position of needing assistance before."

She said that's eased up some, but supply chain issues and increased costs aren't just affecting families. Some community service orga-



Ron Zimmer, building trades instructor at the Prosser Career Education Center, shows volunteers how to assemble a bed at the Metro United Way's annual Build-a-Bed event on Saturday. Pam Ottersbach, director of Southern Indiana for Metro United Way, said she enjoys helping her community through her work.

nizations are spending more than they expected for the year because of issues related to COVID.

"I was just in a conversation with one of our food pantries," Ottersbach said. "What they're experiencing now, some people might see as one or two steps removed from COVID, but they're dealing with the increased cost of food. The budget they've put in place isn't really prepared to support those increased costs that they're seeing."

She said in Indiana, Metro United Way has secured two grants totaling more than \$2.1 million, because of the problems caused by the pandemic. She said that's gone a long way to providing monetary resources to their community partners, which has helped them continue to

serve Clark, Floyd and Harrison counties.

But as she looks ahead to 2022, she said the next initiative touches on two of the organization's focus areas – the wealth gap and the education gap. Ottersbach said they're working with the Salvation Army on an initiative called Pathways to Hope.

She said the idea is to find ways to help families who want to become homeowners get keys to their own homes. She said it helps students with success by keeping them in the same schools, and it helps create generational wealth.

"We all know the fastest way to create generational wealth is through home ownership," Ottersbach said. "Stable housing allows a kid to become more successful in school, and then as

“If somebody doesn’t know where they’re getting dinner tonight, the rest of it doesn’t matter”

we become successful homeowners, we can pass that estate down to generations as they come. It really could be such a significant factor in moving a family, possibly from poverty, to generational wealth over then next 10-15 years.”

She said as they look at new ways to help people, she has to keep in mind the existing service providers working with Metro United Way. She said a program needs to work without causing issues in another area.

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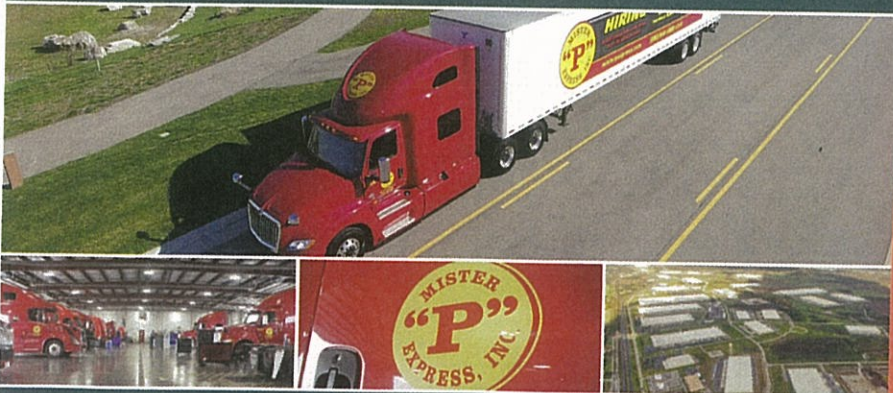
matter,” Ottersbach said. “Again, we know for us to make long-term, sustainable impact, we really have to be come very specific in what that initiative is. I say that, though, with the caution that as we look to this, we’re very aware of not wanting to cause chaos on in our current provider system.”

She said she gets excited about the opportunities Metro United Way can provide for people and their families, and it’s something that keeps her energized in her work.

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