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JOHN T. SHAW: State community foundations crucial

JOHN T. SHAW

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Members of the Bloomington-Normal Community Bells' Sunshine Bells perform during the Celebrating Local Philanthropy Luncheon and Nonprofits Workshop on Thursday, Nov. 14, 2019, at the Radisson Hotel and Conference Center in Normal. The event, presented by Illinois Prairie Community Foundation, honored the 2019 Philanthropists of the Year, Paul and Sandra Harmon of Normal. Friday is National Philanthropy Day.

LEWIS MARIEN, THE PANTAGRAPH

Most Americans have a strong connection to our country, but our most tangible, visceral, and enduring attachments are to the communities in which we live. These are the places that we call home and that shape us from our earliest days to our final years.

Community Foundations strengthen the social and economic fabric of our communities, blending the best features of skilled intelligence agencies and shrewd investment banks. They identify and respond to social and economic needs in our communities and marshal resources to address them. They make communities safer, more vibrant, and more productive.

Community Foundations are public charities that are funded by scores of donors and governed by boards that reflect the communities they serve. According to “Inside Philanthropy,” a news service that studies philanthropy, there are more than 800 Community Foundations in the United States. They vary substantially in size and scope, with some overseeing assets in the low six figures while others, such as the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, hold billions.

Illinois has nearly three dozen Community Foundations sprinkled up and down the Prairie State. They can be found in Aurora, Bloomington, Centralia, Champaign, Charleston, Decatur, Dixon, Downers Grove, Edwardsville, Effingham, Galesburg, Joliet, Kankakee, Marion, Moline, Morton, Oak Park, Ottawa, Paris, Peoria, Rochelle, Springfield, Sycamore and other communities. Community Foundations are funded by individuals, families, businesses, and government grants. They accept contributions of cash, stocks, bonds, and real property such as farmland.

“Community Foundations are important vehicles for philanthropy,” says Joshua Gibb, president of the Galesburg Community Foundation. “Illinois is fortunate to have a Community Foundation that serves every county and citizen in the state.”

Amanda Standerfer, executive director of the Alliance of Illinois Community Foundations, says community foundations “serve an important role in helping donors live out their philanthropic interests in a community. Everyone has the capacity to be philanthropic – whether that’s \$10 or \$100,000. Every dollar makes a difference and community foundations are the trusted organization in every community in Illinois that ensures those donations support the causes donors care about.”

Standerfer says community foundations often manage endowments for educational scholarships, causes such as arts programs or social issues, and specific organizations such as the public library.

“The community foundations throughout Illinois are the best organization to connect donors and causes that will make a difference. Community foundations compound the impact by pooling donor resources and directing it to address community needs,” she says.

Byram Fager, president of the Southern Illinois Community Foundation, argues that community foundations advocate, educate, and invest.

“Community foundations play an important role as a community champion and an independent voice that can speak to the needs of the community. As a community foundation leader, I often spend as much time speaking about community needs and all of the nonprofits that are working to provide services, as I do speaking about the services of the community foundation,” he says.

Last year, Illinois’ community foundations teamed up with Forefront, a statewide advocacy group for the social impact sector, to commission a “Transfer of Wealth” study. The study shows that the current household net worth in Illinois is valued at more than \$3.5 trillion and that about \$435 billion will transfer from one generation to the next by 2030.

Community foundations want to direct some of this wealth to transform their communities.

“The Transfer of Wealth Study shows that there are considerable resources in our state. There is significant wealth – and opportunities for philanthropy – in all parts of Illinois,” says Gibb of the Galesburg Community Foundation.

John T. Shaw is the director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.