

Donations save Boys & Girls Clubs

'Act of God,' volunteers raise \$315,000 in 60 days to plug hole left by United Way budget cut.

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Plans have been scrapped to close three Boys & Girls Clubs that serve up to 400 children, thanks to an outpouring of support from the community.

The organization was among the charities most affected by recent United Way budget cuts. But donors came forward with \$310,000 the clubs lost - plus another \$5,000.

The money came in response to a bold campaign: The clubs gave themselves 60 days to recoup the lost funding, which was 45 percent of their annual United Way allocation.

They met that deadline, in what Director Marty Clary called "an act of God."

"We prayed as if God would provide, but we didn't sit and wait," said Clary. "We had 40 volunteers who made 1,700 phone calls in one day. We treated it as a true emergency."

Without the money, the organization expected to begin closing some clubs in October. Among the first would be the club in Boulevard Homes, a community where the average household income is \$7,000 or less. That club has 267 members and an average daily attendance of 75, Clary said.

"These are the neediest of the needy, in a high-crime community where there were three shootings over the past year, one 150 yards from the club's front door," he said.

The seven Charlotte clubs are run by the Salvation Army and serve 2,300 youths, ages 6 to 18. The clubs typically operate in the city's toughest low-income areas, with a goal of keeping children off the streets and focused on learning.

Clary says 91 donors came forward with gifts that ranged from \$3 to \$148,000, the former from someone who found the money on the street and felt uncomfortable keeping it.

Michelle Braun of Matthews was among the donors who identified herself as a former club member. Now 39, a college graduate and working for Bank of America, she credits the clubs with helping her struggling mother hold the family together on a \$12,000 salary.

"It's hard to be a single mom and work, and also find quality care for your kids," says Braun, who attended the clubs for nearly three years.

"We never knew we were poor growing up, and the clubs helped by giving us the same experiences and fun as other kids. I'm grateful."