

# Crisis Assistance aims to engage major donors

[Todd Cohen](#) | April 17, 2012

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**Carol Hardison (left) and Michelle Hamilton**

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- During the recession, the number of families that Crisis Assistance Ministry served at least doubled to over 200 a day from over 100.

The agency, which provides emergency financial assistance, a free store and free furniture, also raised millions of dollars in one-time gifts to address critical needs fueled by the recession, says Carol Hardison, its CEO.

While the recession is over, "there's still great need," she says, "but the one-time gifts are gone."

To address continuing demand for its services, Crisis Assistance has revamped the way it works with donors, aiming to help them better understand the needs of people in crisis, and to engage them in the work of the agency.

Operating with an annual budget of \$17 million, the agency in the fiscal year ended June 30, 2011, provided financial assistance to 22,000 families, served over 13,000 families through its free store, and served about 2,000 families through its furniture bank.

Crisis Assistance generates \$10.5 million in revenue from government contracts, plus another \$2 million in donated clothing and furniture that it distributes.

It also raised \$5 million in contributed income, including \$2 million from individuals, \$1 million each from religious congregations and foundations, and \$500,000 each from businesses and United Way of Central Carolinas.

Traditionally, Crisis Assistance has raised money from individuals through direct-mail appeals, and average gifts tend to be modest.

In the end-of-year holiday season in 2011, for example, average gifts from new donors totaled about \$250, says Michelle Hamilton, the agency's chief advancement officer.

But Crisis Assistance last fall launched a new effort to raise major gifts, or those of \$10,000 or more.

As part of that effort, Hardison and Hamilton together took a class at the Leadership Gift School.

Directed by Charlotte fundraising consultant Karla Williams, the school brings together the executive directors and development directors of 12 local nonprofits one day a month for eight months and focuses on how they can do a better job raising major gifts from individuals.

Crisis Assistance also has reallocated one of its fundraising positions to focus on "major" gifts, or those of \$10,000 or more, and embarked on a strategy to cultivate all individual donors.

Building on a longstanding practice, for example, every donor receives a thank-you letter and phone call.

Depending on the size of the gift, the person making the phone call may be a volunteer, a member of the development staff, Hardison or the board chair.

The caller also will ask why the donor made a contribution, might follow up with a personal visit, and might invite the donor to visit the agency, possibly for the family volunteer day it has begun holding on the third Saturday of each month.

"It's a terrific way for us to get to know donors, for them to get to know the agency, and for them to see our building and what we're doing with their investment," Hamilton says.

Crisis Assistance also will be making personal visits to prospective major donors, and has been upgrading its technology to more effectively process and acknowledge gifts and track its relationships with donors.

The new strategy seems to be working.

In the fiscal year during which Hardison and Hamilton took the class, Crisis Assistance received gifts of \$10,000 or more from 39 donors, and it is on track in the current fiscal year to increase that total.

And in recent months, it received a \$100,000 gift from a donor whose largest gift had been \$50,000.

This spring, the agency will launch a "Sustainers Circle" to recognize donors who give \$10,000 or more.

Hardison, who estimates she spends 65 percent of her time developing relationships with donors and prospective donors, says her job is to understand their interests.

"My job is to listen," she says. "What community or societal problem are they interested in solving, and what is the match" with the agency.