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## Stith reflects on four years at helm of United Way

KATHERINE KNOTT The News-Enterprise 9 hrs ago



JILL PICKETT/The News-Enterprise Megan Stith, posing Wednesday outside the organization's office in Elizabethtown, has worked with United Way of Central Kentucky for seven years. She currently is the organization's president and CEO. She is leaving this role to become the dean of institutional advancement at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, begin July 1.

JILL PICKETT/The News-Enterprise

For Megan Stith, working with United Way of Central Kentucky is personal.

"It's like my third child," said Stith, who served at the helm of the nonprofit since 2014. "It has to be personal. That's what our community deserves."

Under her direction, the organization implemented new programs and set fundraising records. But Stith's lasting legacy with United Way is charting a new course for the organization's future and focusing its resources on specific community issues and needs.

That focus is what Stith said she's most proud of. During its annual grant cycle, the organization has worked to pay for programs and agencies that align with its mission: moving residents out of poverty through employment.

"We used to fund the agency as a whole," she said. "Now, we're funding a specific program and the goal is to fund a specific result. That's what makes us different."

At the end of this month, Stith will step down as president and CEO of United Way. She's moving to a position at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College where she'll serve as dean of institutional advancement. She starts July 1.

Stith said the job was one she couldn't pass up. She sees potential with the college and wants to help it have a bigger impact.

ECTC President and CEO Juston Pate said he's looking forward to having Stith at the college while Jon Ballard, chairman of the local United Way's board of directors, said he's sad to see her leave.

Christa Shouse will be interim director of United Way. Ballard, who is superintendent of Elizabethtown Independent Schools, said a national search is underway.

He said it will be hard to replace Stith.

"I think we're very strong and heading in a great direction," Ballard said. "Most importantly, our community is committed to United Way. We've seen good things happen, and Megan has helped us get to that point."

**A NEW FOCUS.** Early into Stith's time as the local United Way president, the organization identified the declining workforce as a key issue for the community.

Last year, United Way announced Way to Work, a program aimed at helping residents secure and retain employment. The organization also started a community hotline, 2-1-1, to connect those in need with resources. Additionally, it has paid for programs that can help individuals move out of poverty.

At the end of May, the organization awarded more than \$937,000 in grants to 34 programs in its five-county service area. The programs address education, financial stability, health and basic needs, which United Way sees as the building blocks of a self-sufficient life.

“I can give a why for every program we fund,” she said. “I couldn’t always say that.”

Stith joined United Way in 2011 and moved in to the president position at the end of 2014. Ballard said Stith was instrumental in outlining those funding areas.

“We’re working on problems that no one agency can tackle alone,” she said.

Under Stith’s direction, the organization has honed its focus on results to better determine how its money was making a difference in the community. It also moved beyond its primary role as the community’s fundraiser, which still is a key part of United Way. The recent annual campaign raised \$1.4 million.

“We’re not fundraisers like we used to be,” Stith said. “Dollars are the tools but not what we do.”

During her tenure, United Way launched Central Kentucky Services, a tool to help connect volunteers with organizations. Stith said the portal helped to make United Way more efficient and to better help its partner agencies.

Stith said the foundation for United Way’s shift began under her predecessor, Christopher Wilborn.

She said United Way organizations across the country were experiencing challenges as the workforce changed and payroll deductions declined.

“We knew we needed to change,” she said.

So United Way decided to focus on “the best work we can do with what we have,” she said.

In the past four years, the local United Way has expanded its presence in outlying counties. In the recent grant cycle, 11 of the 24 agencies were outside Hardin County.

Stith said she also made it a priority to fund early childhood programs. In 2011, two early childhood programs were paid for by United Way. Since then, Born Learning academies have increased in the area along with the number of Born Learning Trails.

“If kindergarten readiness matters in Hardin County, it has to matter for all counties,” she said.

Stith is quick to credit the staff at United Way and its board of directors for their work in achieving this shift. She described her role more as a coach and cheerleader.

“I had the map (of where we wanted to go),” she said. “The community rallied to answer the call.”

Stith said United Way is bigger than one person, which allowed her to accept the new job.

“Support for United Way is bigger than who is at the helm,” she said. “We’ve done amazing things over last few years. It’s a great opportunity for someone with a lot more energy.”

Ballard said the search committee hopes to have someone hired by early August in time for the kickoff of the next campaign. He said they are looking for a visionary and someone who will sustain what the organization has been doing.

## A NEW JOB.

Since ECTC announced that Stith would be joining the college’s leadership team, many community members have offered Stith their ideas.

“It’s so exciting seeing how much people want to see ECTC grow and succeed,” she said.

As dean of institutional advancement, she’ll look for new opportunities and find ways to make them happen such as through community support or grants, Pate said.

“We have many opportunities to undertake — new initiatives, new programs, support structures, new facilities – to allow us to add value to people’s lives in ways we have not done before,” he said. “What Megan will help us do will make these (things) possible.”

Provost Tiffany Evans has overseen advancement efforts for the past year and a half.

The new University Center is at the top of Stith’s list of projects.

In January, Dr. Robert and Rita Robbins donated \$1 million toward that project. Pate has said he wants to renovate the student center to bring more four-year programs to the area.

Stith said her first task will be having lots of meetings and reaching out to counties in the college's service area, which is larger than United Way's.

"I'll have my running shoes on for many months," she said.

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