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The Multifamily Industry Gives Back

By Anuradha Kher, Online News Editor

New York—Almost every corporation in the U.S. today is involved in some form of charity. Whether it is the well-known American Idol's 'Idol Gives Back' program that raises millions, or the countless other unknown initiatives that small and large companies undertake, there is no shortage of willing volunteers out there. Multi-housing owners and managers are also at the forefront, serving in communities where they have properties. In fact, it is more common to find a multifamily company that does some charitable work than one that doesn't.

The Lane Co. takes its duty towards the needy very seriously. "We are not just about the bricks and sticks," Ka'Ren Sarvis, director of marketing and training at the Lane Co., tells MHN. "Anyone can manage an apartment community and do a fairly good job at it. Of course, we pride ourselves in good performance, but part of that performance is being able to embrace the people who live in those bricks and sticks. But that's not even the reason we get involved in various charitable efforts. We do it because it makes our hearts feel good. When you do something for those in need, it makes you feel good. It also motivates our associates."

Over the years, the Lane Co. has participated in many different efforts. From Habitat for Humanity to having their own giving tree during the holiday season, to establishing a foundation to help their own associates in need.

Currently, the company focuses on a few initiatives including the Atlanta Community Food Bank. "We get together and collect food. Anyone who might be in need due to natural disaster in the Southeast region will receive food from this bank. In the past 16 years we decided to step up to the plate, realizing that hunger exists in the U.S. in devastating numbers," says Sarvis.

Another one of their initiatives is Community Life Concepts, also known as CLC. It's a nonprofit that teaches job and life skills to residents of low-income communities. It's an independent nonprofit that – years ago – was part of Lane. Lane continues to be a big supporter. The Associate HOPE Committee is also a nonprofit. HOPE stands for 'Helping Our People Everyday. Instead of a hand out, it is designed to give a 'hand up' to associates facing a crisis or serious unexpected event.

"Our goal is to get all our employees involved with various charitable activities," Sarvis explains.

For Andrew Abramson, president of Value Cos., it was a personal experience that led to the founding of the Cure Breast Cancer Foundation. Abramson's wife suffered from breast cancer twice in a span of seven years. She recovered and the Cure Breast Cancer Foundation was established in 2007. Since then the foundation has donated through various means over \$1 million to the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center for research in the area. Specifically, the money funds Dr. Larry Norton's research.

In addition, to minimize expenses, the staff at Value Cos. donates their time and services for administration of the foundation and also participates in fund raising. Value Cos. donated \$100 per new application that was signed in the month of October to the foundation. "We hold several events during the year to raise funds—right now it's a major golf outing. The goal is to find a

cure for breast cancer,” says Abramson. Dr. Norton says, “The freedom afforded from the flexible funding from Cure Breast Foundation has encouraged novel explorations that would not have been possible otherwise.”

Value Cos. is now hoping to get large property owners to contribute a portion of their application fees to breast cancer research.

Recognition and awards from the community is one of the perks of being involved in charitable activities but it’s definitely not what drives these companies to take on causes. Mark-Taylor Residential for example recently received a governor’s award for their work with homeless families and Save The Family, a Phoenix nonprofit that helps needy families become financially self-sufficient. “The reason we do this is that we have a commitment to the community and when Save the Family approached us, it was a natural fit to provide what we have to help satisfy their greatest need,” Dale Phillips, president of Mark-Taylor Residential, tells MHN.

The company has partnered with Save the Family for three years now and provides 12 apartments to families who come through their system. “Save the Family finds needy families a home and they pay the rent amount to Save the Family which keeps it in an account and at the end of the year, they have a nest egg and a means to acquire housing for themselves,” says Phillips.

Mark-Taylor also works with U-Mom day centers providing housing as well as furnishings. What does it cost to the company? The average rent for a one-bedroom in Phoenix is \$1000 so at least \$144,000 of its revenue.

AIMCO started one of its key initiatives in 2004 to celebrate the company’s 10th anniversary. Since then, the company has been offering each employee 10 hours paid for by AIMCO to serve a non-profit organization of their choice.

“For us, it’s a key part of our culture,” says Patti Shwayder, senior vice president of government relations and communications at AIMCO. “When we started this in 2004, AIMCO was thankful for the good times and the growth and we wanted to give back.”

In recent years, AIMCO’s employees have renovated a kitchen at the Denver rescue mission for women and children, partnered with Habitat for Humanity, built trails in parks, cleaned up parks, served meals to homeless, worked in food banks and been to retirement homes. “The employees take it upon themselves and various team leaders sprout up around the country, choose the activity and organize their team members around various causes,” says Shwayder.

Most recently, AIMCO established two national days of community service for team members and the company noted an increase in participation by 25 percent during the economic downturn. The company also gives full pay to team members who are on active duty as if they are full-time AIMCO employees and it also support several other veterans programs.

“We looked at whether we should have a pet cause but decided against it. There are so many causes and many of our team members have causes that they are passionate about,” she concludes.

Property management company Castle Group too encourages its employees to give back and Cathy Donnelly, director of community relations for the company, and one its founders, sets a fine example. She started K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Service Program) for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Broward in one Davie club. Today K.I.S.S. serves 3000 children each day a free, nutritious snack and puts direct emphasis on fighting the obesity crisis by providing health and nutrition education as well as physical fitness activities for our kids. What started as a small initiative has now grown into a big program: Castle now has to buy food from a third-party to provide for boys and girls at K.I.S.S. In addition, the company gets involved in other charitable causes as the need be. For example, they provided relief efforts, food and aid in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti.

“We are a family business and our families are very philanthropic,” says Donnelly. “We built this business and are very grateful and we really want to give back. All of us [the founders] are from Canada and this is also a way of giving back to the country that has given us so much,” she explains.

Castle Group is now in the process of establishing the Castle Care Foundation, which “aims to reign in what the company does in order to really organize ourselves to be the most effective we can be with the leverage that we have,” says Donnelly. She hopes the foundation will be set up by end of 2011.