

Philanthropist gives \$5 million to Capital Area Food Bank

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By Annie Gowen
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One of the county's wealthiest philanthropists said Monday that he is donating \$5 million to jump-start construction of a \$37 million facility for the Capital Area Food Bank, allowing it to double its capacity during a time of crucial need.

William E. Conway Jr., co-founder and managing director of the private equity firm the Carlyle Group, said he was moved to give after hearing news stories about the plight of the jobless and after talking with homeless men near his Pennsylvania Avenue NW office.

"I wish I had done this before now," said Conway, a McLean resident, at the food bank's existing facility in Northeast Washington. "There is no reason in the capital city of the richest country in the world for anybody to be hungry."

Conway's \$5 million donation is one of the largest publicly announced gifts made by an individual in D.C. in the past decade, according to Giving USA and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, which tracks giving.

The money will pave the way for construction to begin as early as next month on the facility at 4900 Puerto Rico Ave. NE. By doubling its capacity to 120,000 square feet, the food bank will have more room for fresh produce and a kitchen where casseroles and other hot meals can be made.

Lynn J. Brantley, president and CEO of the Capital Area Food Bank, said news of the gift was met with "gratitude and amazement" at a time when the nonprofit is facing its toughest year since it was founded in 1980 and poverty and hunger are on the rise throughout the region .

The food bank - the region's primary source for more than 700 food pantries and other nonprofits around the region - distributed a record 30 million pounds of food this year, up from 27 million last year.

"I've never seen as much demand and need as there is right now," Brantley said.

More than 641,000 Washington-area residents are now at risk or experiencing hunger, and the group's partner agencies have seen need rise by 30 percent to 100 percent during the economic downturn.

Food bank officials had hoped to complete the building by next year with the help of the District's Office of Housing and Community Development and major private donors including

J.W. Marriott Jr. and the Philip L. Graham Fund, named for the former publisher of The Washington Post.

But then the recession hit, other donations - and the project - stalled.

"We were kind of at a standstill," Brantley said. "That's why Mr. Conway's help is so uplifting." She now hopes the building will be finished by 2012.

At the food bank yesterday, Ronald Gaither of Arise Outreach Ministries in Capitol Heights was picking up a pallet of food for his church's Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless. The church fed 400 last year and will feed 500 this year, but it could serve more, Gaither said.

Nationally, charitable donations fell slightly to \$303 billion last year, much of it going to religious and educational institutions rather than social-service organizations, according to the philanthropy center.

Conway, 61, is worth approximately \$2 billion and ranks No. 182 on Forbes 400 list of America's richest people.

Over the years, he and his wife, Joanne, have quietly given millions to support housing for the homeless and Catholic Charities through their Bedford Falls Foundation - named after the town in the film "It's a Wonderful Life."

Conway rarely talks publicly about his philanthropy but said he was doing so now in hopes his gift would move others to donate.

"I'd like everyone to be aware of the magnitude of the need," Conway said. "If I help out, maybe others will help out, too."