

Nonprofits gear up for spring fundraising

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Many nonprofit executives are breathing easier as this year's spring fundraiser season has shaped up at least a little better than last year's, but many are counting more than ever on their big name event chairs and honorees to help meet revenue goals.

By all accounts, last year's events were break-even or down slightly from previous years, with donors and corporate sponsors in many cases stepping back from commitment levels. This year, however, ticket and table sales seem to have bounced back.

The Home For Little Wanderers, for example, holds its annual gala on May 26 and already is \$100,000 ahead of last year and ahead of where the organization was a couple of years ago, said Lisa Rowan-Gillis, the organization's vice president for development and public relations. The event, with Suffolk Construction CEO John Fish as co-chairman, is expected to raise \$1 million, about a fifth of the organization's total budget.

"It's a good bellwether, a good omen," Rowan-Gillis said. "It's probably a sign, in terms of the economy. People are more comfortable participating in galas."

For many nonprofits, annual galas and fundraisers represent a significant part of their development budgets and keep donors interested and engaged. Holding a fundraising event, even in an uncertain economy, is worth the risk and effort, said nonprofit executives.

The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, known as JDRF, with its **Hearts & Heroes** gala May 22, is running ahead of expectation, having raised \$1.3 million already — \$100,000 more than at this point in 2009, said Heidi Daniels, executive director of the New England chapter of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. The event is honoring Sean Doherty, managing director and general counsel of **Bain Capital**, and his wife, Suzy.

"Things are shaping up really well compared to last year," Daniels said. "It will only go up at this point."

And the annual hopeFound golf tournament, the organization's largest fundraiser, sold out months ago and the organization has had to turn teams away, said Brian Leary, chairman of the event, an attorney with **McCarter & English** and former WCVB-TV anchor, adding that he has "never experienced a year like this."

Similarly, Sport in Society, based at **Northeastern University**, raised \$225,000 from its recent 25th anniversary gala, compared with \$100,000 in 2009, the most growth coming in individual gifts in the \$5,000 range, said Dave Czesniuk, director of operations.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston held its annual corporate fundraising dinner in February, raising \$1.4 million — \$500,000 more than the goal, said Jill Goldweitz, senior director of annual giving and events. In May, the organization held a second fundraiser, primarily for individual donors, and met its goal of raising \$1.7 million.

The one fundraiser that seemed to get a kick in the shins from the still-faltering economy was Community Servings' LifeSavor dinner event, which had a goal of raising \$450,000 from its April 6 event but fell \$15,000 short of its goal — and generated slightly less even than last year. The event has hovered around \$500,000 in revenue over the past few years, said Tim Leahy, vice president of development and communications.

Many of the organizations seeing the most success with fundraisers this spring are those who count heavily on Boston's powerful business executives who chair event committees or agree to be honorees and can tap their wealthy networks.

"If a not-for-profit doesn't have someone who can tap into the wealthy, they can't win. It's a reality," said Jack Connors, founder of advertising agency Hill Holliday, who chairs many of Boston's largest, and most successful, fundraisers. "But there are a lot of young people coming along (who are fundraising for nonprofits). The bench is looking really good."