

Chicago Tribune

Editorial: Support your favorite charity (minus the tuxedo)

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For many nonprofit organizations, the annual fundraising bash is a highlight of the year. Red carpet photos. Tuxedos and ball gowns. Bubbly flutes and sauced ... chicken.

The galas are major fundraising events that support programs and employees. Don't forget: Nonprofits are employers too. Marianne Woodward of Communities In Schools of Chicago writes: "The COVID-19 pandemic is not only having devastating impacts on airlines, shopping malls and restaurants. Nonprofit organizations like mine are also fighting every day to stay financially strong during this time of immense economic hardship.

"This poses a serious challenge for Chicagoland. Nonprofits drive our city's and state's economies. According to a 2019 report from Independent Sector, Illinois' more than 60,000 nonprofits employed 11 percent of the state's workforce, generating almost \$110 billion in annual economic activity."

Like so many other in-person events in the COVID-19 era, parties are on indefinite hiatus. Large indoor gatherings aren't allowed under ever-changing state mandates, and donors wouldn't want to crowd into a ballroom anyway. So nonprofits are turning to virtual fundraisers to help cover their expenses.

Misericordia, a North Side nonprofit that furnishes homes and other support for some 600 children and adults with developmental disabilities, had to scrub its November Heart of Mercy Ball and **replace it with a virtual event**. But the contributions didn't match the \$1.2 million the gala raised last year. "Nothing takes the place of being with your community," Chief Development Officer Lois Gates told the Tribune.

The pandemic forced the abrupt cancellation of The Joffrey Ballet's annual spring gala, leaving too little time to shift to a virtual version. The dance company **also lost the revenue** it used to get from performances, which

have been suspended. But it is adapting. On Saturday, it hosted a virtual event centered on its Chicago-flavored version of “The Nutcracker,” with footage from rehearsals and live performances. It raised \$215,000 — “better than our expectations,” according to interim Chief Development Officer Chris Jabin.

Other groups have also adapted quickly to the new environment. The YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago expects its Nov. 19 Zoom affair to pull in as much money as last year’s leadership luncheon did — and without the costs of hosting 1,200 guests in person, it may even yield a larger profit. It was also a bargain for participants, requiring only a \$25 YWCA membership, compared with as much as \$300 for an individual ticket last year. A virtual event for Friends of Prentice, which supports Northwestern Medicine Prentice Women’s Hospital, roughly matched its net take from last year’s get-together at the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel.

Special Olympics Chicago and Special Children’s Charities are hosting a Nov. 17 virtual fundraiser during which viewers, no ticket required, can watch Mayor Lori Lightfoot and other honorees discuss the work of the organization from the comfort of their living rooms — no neckties required. Will the Polar Plunge still take place in 2021? To be determined, but the nonprofit squeezed the popular event under the wire this year in early March, before the pandemic hit.

So if you love fundraising balls, but love your favorite nonprofits more, donate to preserve the programs they support. The parties will return once the virus is under control. If you’re one of those who would rather skip the tux rental, then you might want to show your gratitude for being allowed to attend in your jammies, and donate what you’re saving on parking, a babysitter and the cash bar.

Be extra generous with the red kettles this year. Organize a virtual telethon as All-In McHenry County did this summer through a Facebook page. Do something for your favorite nonprofits. Consider how you can help ensure that when the pandemic is over, they’ll still be around.

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