

After Lewiston shooting, distribution of \$6.6 million in funds stands up to scrutiny

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In the weeks following the Lewiston mass shooting, thousands of donations poured in from across the state and country to support survivors and victims' families and help the broader community heal.

Most of those donations went into a centralized fund managed by the Maine Community Foundation, one of the state's largest philanthropic organizations. In four months, \$6.6 million was raised.

That money was distributed earlier this year, with \$4.7 million going to 162 individuals who were victims of the shooting, family members or people directly impacted, and \$1.9 million getting divided evenly among 29 local nonprofit organizations that were chosen by a committee of area leaders.

Jeff Dion, a nationally recognized victims' advocate who has worked with dozens of communities affected by mass shootings including Lewiston, said the fundraising effort here was a model for how to do it right.

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"This was the 30th or 31st one of these I've done, and I think the response in Lewiston was the best that I've seen," he said.

Amy Sussman, whose nephew Maxx Hathaway was one of the 18 people killed at Schemengees Bar & Grill and Just-in-Time Recreation on Oct. 25, 2023, disagrees with the way the money was allocated, raising concerns about how it was shared with nonprofit groups.

Sussman said she recognizes that the entire Lewiston-Auburn community – and indeed all of Maine – was affected by the tragedy, but still thinks all of the money should directly help victims and families.

"I'm sure Maine Community Foundation does wonderful things, I just think in this circumstance, I wish they hadn't included nonprofits," she said.

An out-of-state group, the Uvalde Foundation for Kids, which was formed after a school shooting in Texas, also has raised concerns about the Lewiston fund. In a statement this month, the group's national director, Daniel Chapin, questioned how groups chosen were vetted and said it would conduct an independent review. It also sent its concerns to the Office of the Maine Attorney General.

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No other complaints have been made about the Lewiston fund, a spokesperson for the attorney general's office said.

There are legitimate questions about who should be eligible to receive funds after tragedies such as the mass shooting in Lewiston, said Anita Busch, a co-founder of the organization VictimsFirst. The group was formed by family members of mass shooting victims and assists other victims of mass casualty events. Busch's cousin was one of a dozen people murdered at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, in 2012.

But both Dion and Busch dismissed the Uvalde group's criticism and said there are no grounds to challenge decisions made by the Lewiston fund because it used the funds just as it said it would.

CLEAR FROM THE START

From the beginning, the Maine Community Foundation was clear that its Lewiston shooting fund would include two streams – one a victims and families fund, the other a broad recovery fund. Donors knew when they were giving how that money would be used, and some gave only to the victims' fund.

Dion explained that when fundraising groups draw a tight circle around individuals who should be eligible for funds, creating a separate community fund is a way to expand the impact of the donations. That has become a best practice following tragedies that generate significant philanthropic interest.



People hold candles and make the “I love you” sign at the end of a vigil for victims of Lewiston’s mass shooting on Nov. 1, 2023. *Joe Phelan/Kennebec Journal, file*
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“You can’t give everybody in the community money who was affected or traumatized, but we can help them provide their services, which is what all these nonprofits did in those days after,” he said.

Beckie Conrad, a former Lewiston-Auburn Chamber of Commerce president and the chair of the steering committee for the broad recovery fund, said the nonprofits chosen for funds either provided relevant services or support to people present at either shooting location or to support people in the region who suffered psychological trauma.

The first category is narrow; the second is much broader.

“That is where the conversation was really thoughtful and deliberate around understanding impact,” said Conrad, who lost a nephew in the Lewiston shooting. Tommy Conrad, a manager at the bowling alley, was killed after he stepped in front of a young boy, saving his life.

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Busch said Maine Community Foundation deserves credit for being transparent throughout the process and for working with a leader like Dion, but she also said the questions raised by Sussman are valid, even if they appear isolated.

“I think if you are donating to local nonprofits, it’s OK to ask: ‘Did those nonprofits directly help victims?’ ” Busch said.

The answer to that question is subjective, though. How do you define victim?

“In our committee, we came to the conclusion that no one of us could determine what was right for an entire community,” Conrad said. “People could pick any of the 29 organizations and say that might not be one I would choose.

TAKING A BROAD APPROACH

“But we felt as a committee that we would take the broadest perspective of funding organizations that responded after the shooting. They really picked up where work needed to get done.”

Among the 29 organizations that were selected to receive funds were:

- Community Concepts, which established the Maine Resiliency Center to assist individuals directly impacted by the shooting.
- Central Maine Medical Center, which used funds to provide counseling for staff members.
- Lewiston-Auburn Youth Network, which saw an increase in need among underserved populations following the tragedy.

The Maine Community Foundation provided the full list, with a description of how the funds have been used.

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Conrad, who has lived and worked in the Lewiston-Auburn area for more than 40 years, said she understands if people have concerns or questions about the work she and others did distributing donations.

“There is no dress rehearsal for this,” she said. “I think it would be hard for any community to predict where would you fall if this happened in your community. But the broadest response has been positive and thankful.”

Dion said the fact that criticism has been limited speaks to the process. In other communities he’s worked in, that hasn’t been true.

“There is always risk for criticism,” he said. “Whenever you are dealing with people who are traumatized, it’s always a question of whether they will hear and understand you. That’s why we write everything down. You build trust with transparency and the message has always been consistent.”

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