Charities get $3.12b in donations for FY2020

Figure just a 4% dip from year before despite disruption from Covid-19, and higher than in pre-pandemic years

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Despite the Covid-19 pandemic raging in 2020, resulting in many in-person fund-raising events being cancelled or scaled back, donations to the more than 2,000 charities in Singapore fell only slightly that year from the year before.

A total of $3.12 billion in donations was collected by charities here in financial year 2020, a 4 per cent dip from the $3.25 billion in the year before.

Despite the dip, the $3.12 billion is still higher than the sums donated in the pre-pandemic years.

For example, $2.65 billion was donated in FY2017, and $2.87 billion in FY2018, according to data in the Commissioner of Charities’ (COC) 2021 annual report, which was released at the end of November.

A spokesman for the COC said that the total donations for FY2020 were compiled based on charities’ annual submissions for their respective financial years, which vary among charities.

For example, for some charities, the 2020 financial year ended in March 2020, while for others, it ended in December 2020.

The spokesman said of the fall in donations in FY2020: “Covid-19 disrupted the operations and fund-raising activities of the charity sector, affecting the ability of organisations and individuals to donate as much as they used to.”

Since early 2020, many charities have cancelled, postponed or scaled down their physical fund-raising events, the spokesman said, adding that the fall in donations was most evident in the religious and educational sectors.

Donations collected by religious charities such as churches and temples fell by 23 per cent to $1.17 billion in FY2020, from $1.34 billion the financial year before that.

But donations raised by the social and welfare sector rose by 23 per cent to $608.6 million in FY2020, from $494.4 million in FY2019.

The COC spokesman said this increase was because donations could be more focused on giving to those in need because of the pandemic.

As at end-December 2021, there were 2,389 charities registered in Singapore. About half of them are religious groups, while the rest include charities in the social and welfare, healthcare, education and arts sectors.

When asked why donations to charities providing social and welfare services increased, Dr Justin Lee, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said: “I think donors were likely thinking of giving to more urgent needs based on what Covid-19 had brought about – health being an obvious choice, but also social welfare, because families were being hurt by Covid-19 when breadwinners lost their jobs.”

For example, Food From The Heart, a charity that gives food to the needy, saw its donations more than double to $8.7 million in 2020 from $3.9 million in 2019. This was even though it had to cancel major physical fund-raisers in 2020 because of the pandemic.

The charity’s chief executive, Mr Robin Lee, said many companies and groups organised their own fund-raisers to support Food From The Heart, knowing that the donations were helping families facing tough times.

Mr Lee said: “2020 was really an exceptional year for us in terms of donations, due to a heightened sense of community spirit.”

IPS Social Lab head Mathew Mathers noted that more charities in the social and welfare sector had learnt to leverage social media and also used online donation portals to persuade donors to give after the pandemic started, which could have increased the sums raised.

Charities like the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), the Singapore Children’s Society and SPD said they had to find new ways to raise funds. These included online fund-raisers, as traditional in-person fund-raising events such as charity dinners were not feasible or not allowed under the prevailing Covid-19 rules then.

For example, NKF started an online shop in October 2020 selling products to raise funds, said its chief executive, Mr Tim Oei. It raised $22.8 million in its financial year that ended in June 2020. This rose to $23.5 million a year later.

In its last financial year ending in June 2020, it raised $24.4 million, boosted by its fund-raising dinner held the month before. The dinner was postponed from April 2020.

However, charities expressed concerns about waning generosity and falling donations with the worst of the pandemic over, and especially now, given soaring inflation and other economic uncertainties.

For example, donations to Food From The Heart fell to $6.1 million in 2021, even though more families needed help to cope with the rising cost of living, Mr Lee said.

“In 2021, with the easing of pandemic measures and change in general attitudes and adaptation towards a new normal, the pandemic effect outpouring of altruism has slowed down,” he said.