

In the fall of 2009, I read an article in the local newspaper about the shortage of blood donors and the critically low blood supply level at our local Red Cross. In talking about this with the Executive Director of The Avon Chamber of Commerce, which happens to be our tenant in the adjacent building, we thought this would be a great effort to team up on to help the community support the Red Cross.

We spoke with the Donor division and, while skeptical about the location of the drive in a funeral home (actually the part we call our "family center"), the director agreed to visit us. After seeing the space and how accessible it was for their equipment and how it could be set up with room for 5 interview stations, seven donor beds, a large canteen area for eating, a waiting area for 10-15 people, accessible rest rooms, and a private staff break room, it was deemed a dream location.

Before they would book us a date, however, we needed to show support by giving the Red Cross names of at least 50 individuals who agreed to give. We sent email blasts to all of the Chamber members and all our funeral home staff, and within a couple weeks we had more than the required names and were given a definite date for the drive - Tuesday, April 20, 2010, from noon to 6 pm, with 4 donors scheduled every 15 minutes, or about 16 per hour, or 80 for the day.

The members of the Chamber who own restaurants donated food for the donors and workers. We had pizza, salads, calzones, shrimp, juices, pasta, sandwiches, and everything in between. Members also contributed small items that were given to each participant in a gift bag - gift certificates for meals, ice cream, gas cards, pens, calendars, nail files, golf balls, tees, etc.

Our staff wanted to do something to encourage people who had never given blood to start and, at the same time, draw attention to all the nonprofit organizations in our community who are Chamber members. We pinpointed groups like Gifts of Love, FAVARAH, Gildo Consolini Post VFW, Nutmeg Symphony Orchestra, and Dollars for Scholars, among about 12 in total. We then decided to make a donation to the charity of the donor's choice for \$25 if they were a first time donor and \$15 if they were a repeat donor. We had the names printed on a large poster and as each person registered to give blood, they could indicate if this was their first time and to which charity they would like a donation made in their name. We also informed the charities about this so they could encourage their supporters to come and give blood. The end result was that we donated over \$2,000 to the very appreciative local charities and encouraged over 30 new blood donors to give blood. This was the highest percentage of new donors in any blood drive for the local Red Cross, and we received many wonderful comments.

In terms of funeral home logistics, the blood drive did require careful scheduling, but we were able to meet two families that day for arrangements and have a visitation on the funeral home side the same evening. We just scheduled the time as if it was another service for that day and we couldn't use the family center side from 11am until 7 pm.

While our Family Center has already been accepted and used by the community for many nonfuneral-related activities (Sunday school classes, community meetings for Girl Scouts, library board meetings, quilt shows, piano recitals, VFW events, a Scout Eagle Ceremony, and basement storage for thousands of books for our library association sale and hundreds of flags the Boy Scouts place on our Main Street on every holiday), the blood drive was a great community program that highlighted the funeral

home/family center as a place for positive community events and not just sad occasions. In fact, the blood drive drew some humorous yet respectful remarks like, “a chance to give blood at the funeral home and be able to walk out afterwards”. The Family Center turned out to be such a great space that when the Booster Club of Avon High School was going to sponsor a blood drive in July, they asked if they could use our facility.

This blood drive was a wonderful way to bring more people to the facility, to see our firm and funeral service in a different light, and help to remove the stereotypes that can haunt us.

John Carmon