

Bentonville: Wal-Mart Revising Donations

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Wal-Mart Stores Inc. is refocusing its charity to give it more punch.

America's No. 1 corporate donor, Wal-Mart traditionally hands out thousands of small checks to Scout troops, food pantries and other local causes in Wal-Mart towns from coast to coast.

While store managers will still sprinkle those \$ 500 checks around their communities, the Wal-Mart Foundation in Bentonville is now steering some dollars to state-level funding pools set up to make larger donations.

It's also focusing more of its charity on a short list of national issues on which the company believes it can have real impact.

"I think Sam Walton said that if you're not changing, you're not going to be successful," said foundation President Margaret McKenna, who replaced Betsy Rei- themeyer last fall.

The new strategy complements the company's traditional "ad hoc" way of giving to specific cases, McKenna said, by providing Wal-Mart the flexibility to make a dent on the high-priority causes it has chosen: education and the workforce, health care, and the environment.

The amount available in each state-level funding pool will depend on how many Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores that state has, McKenna said. She wasn't sure how much that would be for Arkansas.

Wal-Mart's moves come as more companies and individuals are laying calculated plans for their giving, said Bob Kenny, associate director of Boston College's Center on Wealth and Philanthropy.

And if a company's strategic giving plan aligns with its own image-building objectives, such as Wal-Mart's attempts to "go green" or to counter criticism about the health-care benefits it offers its employees, then that is hardly unique, either, Kenny said. "We give to who we identify with," he said. [The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, which has previously criticized Wal-Mart's giving as "more about corporate advertising than it is about helping nonprofits or communities," had no immediate comment Tuesday.](#)

Last year, Wal-Mart gave away \$ 296 million in the United States and \$ 41 million internationally, making it the top corporate giver of cash gifts, McKenna said. The total represents donations both from the foundation and directly from the company.

She said the company's latest rounds of grants for education focused on students from 12 to 26 years old — particularly on improving high school graduation and college retention rates.

A \$ 2.3 million grant announced last month went to the Council of Independent Colleges in Washington, D. C., which will use it to help students who are the first in their families to go to college.

"It's the largest grant we've ever received," said council President Richard Ekman, which represents 580 liberal arts colleges. He said data show the smaller schools do a better job of keeping first-generation students in school.

Immigration and more demanding employment markets mean more first-generation students on college campuses, Ekman said.

He said the council, which applied for the Wal-Mart grant after "we became aware of the fact that Wal-Mart was changing its focus," will distribute the gift to 20 schools that can show they are doing a good job with those students.

Wal-Mart says it and its foundation gave \$ 67 million to education last year, \$ 6 million for environmental issues and, including contributions from Wal-Mart customers, gave more than \$ 39 million to local children's hospitals across North America.

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