



**The Chris Dawson
Foundation**

420 East St N
Sarnia, ON N7T 6Y5

T 519.333.6864

F 519.332.0161

E info@thechrisdawsonfoundation.com

W www.thechrisdawsonfoundation.com

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Non-profit agencies struggle to survive

By DEBORA VAN BRENK, LONDON FREE PRESS

Non-profit and volunteer agencies are starting to hurt -- and some are expected to merge or close -- because of the faltering economy.

But fiscal hard times also give others a much-needed push for "strategic alliances," Michelle Baldwin, head of Pillar Non-Profit Network, told a gathering of non-profit sector workers in London.

Baldwin, whose organization co-ordinates efforts among London volunteer and non-profit groups, said an estimated 10,000 of Canada's 161,000 non-profits are expected to fold in the next year.

And Blair Dimock, research director for the Ontario Trillium Foundation, said others are looking to share facilities or staff as donor dollars shrink.

"Some are facing layoffs, just like the private sector," said Dimock, whose organization provides grants to many Ontario community groups.

His foundation recently surveyed 100 non-profit groups about the impact of the economy on them. His findings suggest about one-third are feeling a pinch.

"It's still early days. It could be as long as three years before we see the full impact of the economic downturn," he said.

Baldwin said the session, the second of its kind here this year, is helpful as non-profit groups strategize about how to serve their communities, who are often needier than ever, in a time when donor dollars are shrinking.

She said she has heard the term "philanthropy depression" to describe how giving has dropped: big givers have said they'll honour their current commitments but are reluctant to make multi-year promises.

Likewise, smaller donors are ramping back their gifts. They want to see immediate needs met and are less likely to give for long-term or non-local projects, said Baldwin.

She said there will be more competition for fewer donor dollars, a need for more focused local fundraising efforts, and an emphasis on non-profits becoming creative and collaborative.

Debora Van Brenk is a Free Press reporter. deb.vanbrenk@sunmedia.ca