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their personal giving habits, a trend fueled by social media and volunteerism.

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Once largely ignored by charities, the under-44 crowd is now out-pacing its elders in their personal giving habits, a trend fueled by social media and volunteerism.

“For a long time, an awful lot of nonprofits never talked to people under 44,” said Mark Brewer, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Central Florida, a public grant-making organization for nearly 400 local charitable funds. “The assumption has been, ‘Oh, younger people don’t have any money.’ And that’s a misconception. A lot of nonprofits are missing out.”

According to new national and local data, the shift in giving comes just as charitable donations are finally showing signs of a comeback, thanks to an improved economy.

A just-released report of public nonprofits by the Community Foundation and the Orlando-based accounting firm Cross, Fernandez & Riley shows charitable giving rebounded to pre-recession levels last year.

“We’re definitely seeing more optimism,” said Melanie Fernandez, a founding partner of the accounting firm. “And optimism tends to make people more inclined to give.”

Younger donors now account for 50 to 60 percent of individual giving, according to the report.

Among that age group, camaraderie seems to have a big influence. Millennials and Gen-Xers — those born between 1983 and 2000 — tend to share their causes with friends, who then ask them to reciprocate.

“When I give, it’s usually because I had a friend email me directly and say, ‘Hey,

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Last year, he raised \$5,000 for the charity’s annual Friendship Walk in just three weeks, largely through Facebook. For this year’s May 4 event, he hopes to double that — a sum not many 30-year-olds would be able to pull out of their own checking accounts.

“With Facebook, it spreads like wildfire,” Streep said.

Technology in general has dramatically changed the face of charitable giving, experts report, by making opportunities to give more immediate and easier.

Margaret Linnane, executive director of the Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership Center at Rollins College, said online giving campaigns, donating via texting, Facebook pages and Twitter appeals have made Millennials and Gen-Xers more connected, immediate and savvy donors.

“It’s not business as usual,” Linnane said. “Younger donors tend to want a higher level of engagement with an organization. You have to involve them through social media and e-communications and invite them to come and learn and experience your mission. Once they do that, they’re much more likely to invest.”

The booming Longwood-based charity Feeding Children Everywhere, for instance, has engaged would-be donors in college and even younger by organizing short food-packing events. To a soundtrack of high-energy music and encouragement from young staffers, the volunteers mix a casserole of rice, lentils and spices for shipment throughout Central Florida and the world. The volunteer groups are required to raise about 25 cents per meal to cover expenses — so a group’s contribution of \$5,000, for instance, will cover 20,000 meals.

“We’re about mobilization and empowerment as much as feeding kids,” said the charity’s founder, Don Campbell. “We’re about helping generations of people have a hands-on experience and giving back.”

That sentiment seems to resonate with those raised on service-learning and social

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“We joke that it’s not just peer to peer, but peer pressure to peer pressure,” Nelson said. “It’s, ‘Hey, I just sponsored you for that walk-a-thon, now will you sponsor me for mine?’ “

The individual donations of the young tend to be smaller than their elders, Nelson and others said. But they add up.

Jenna Sola, 28, an office manager for The Orlando Repertory Theatre, is a good example. In the course of a year, she may give to a friend’s Relay for Life team for the American Cancer Society, various arts groups –including her own — and the charities at which she has volunteered, such as the Coalition for the Homeless.

“I typically give \$10 to \$75, and usually it’s under \$50,” Sola said. “But it’s frequent. I’m always donating online \$20 here or \$25 there.”

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