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## Local Big Brothers, Big Sisters - run by ex-mayor Craig Lowe - shuts down

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After 38 years serving children in Alachua and five surrounding counties, Big Brothers Big Sisters, has closed, its finances in bleak condition.

For the last couple of years, former Gainesville mayor Craig Lowe had run the agency, but resigned in October after not having been in the office for a couple of weeks. He told the Sun Thursday he tried, but couldn't fix the agency's financial problems.

"That was something that was an ongoing problem and I worked on correcting it, but we weren't able to reverse it," he said.

As the person primarily responsible for fundraising, Lowe said he did all he could.

"In order for the agency to succeed, we needed as an organization to fundraise more," Lowe said. "I think under the circumstances, we did what we could."

The nonprofit organization made no formal announcement about its closing until contacted in recent days by the Gainesville Sun, but officials with the nonprofit conceded Thursday that the finances were in dire shape.

Among the problems:

- The agency's handful of employees hadn't been paid since September.
- There were outstanding bills, and the phone and internet were turned off last week.
- The program's presence in the Alachua County schools had dropped conspicuously in the last couple of years, after having been robust.
- The local agency's affiliation with the national office was in jeopardy, and the national office had notified the agency that it was "out of compliance" in a number of areas, including not having paid annual dues.

Volunteers, or “Bigs,” as they're called, were surprised in early December when they received messages from Big Brothers Big Sisters alerting them to the discontinuation of the organization's mentoring program set up to help students in Alachua, Bradford, Columbia, Gilchrist, Levy and Marion counties.

Big Brothers Big Sisters offered mentoring programs to children, ages 6 to 17, including school-based mentoring within Alachua County Public Schools, community-based mentoring and a weekly after-school tutoring program, “Littles Study Hall,” at the organization's Northwest 13th Street office.

These programs are effective due to the “Bigs,” or adult members of the community who are interviewed, selected and paired with “Littles” for at least a yearlong commitment.

Though Bigs did not learn of the program's struggles until they were notified of its end, Nikki Naylor, the agency's most recent program director who had been with the organization more than four years, said there had been red flags for a while.

Naylor said she first alerted Kipp Hayes, the board of directors president, in August that four staff members' checks were overdue. By September, the checks stopped altogether, and she said the staff and board contacted the Tampa-based Big Brothers Big Sisters national office.

Agency representatives cite differing reasons for the financial struggles, but agreed that they've existed for years.

The reason for the agency's inability to overcome those struggles is also unclear, though some pointed fingers at Lowe's hands-off management style.

Hayes felt that the arrival of a new CEO, former Gainesville Mayor Craig Lowe, almost two years ago, did not help the agency climb out of its financial hole.

“The new CEO we elected last year did not do a good enough job of explaining what the problems were,” Hayes said. “We [the Board] thought we had hired the wrong guy.”

The bleak financial situation pre-dates Lowe's tenure.

In April 2010, John Bonacci took over as CEO amid financial difficulties even then, the Sun previously reported. Bonacci left the organization in 2012 to join the YMCA, and was replaced by Ada Torres Del-Gais, Lowe's predecessor.

When she left to take a job in Tampa, the board was hopeful, Hayes said.

“This was the year, 2016 was the year we were coming out of debt,” Hayes said. “We don't want to make anyone out to be a villain, but there are villains here.”

Naylor said a lack of fundraising and individual donations finally brought the ongoing money troubles to a head.

No one other than Lowe, the CEO, was dedicated to fundraising, she said.

Lowe had ideas for new fundraisers beyond the organization's usual annual events — but never seemed to follow through, she said.

“Fundraisers weren't as successful as we thought, or we didn't have them,” Naylor said. “I don't think it was a misplacement of funds, I think it was a lack of effort.”

Hayes doesn't agree.

“The CEO [hadn't] been doing his job,” Hayes said. “He did a terrible job.”

Lowe said Thursday he regrets the agency's closing but said “we did what we could.”

Besides donations, grants made up a good chunk of the agency's revenue.

During the 2014-2015 fiscal year, Big Brothers Big Sisters received two grants through CAPP: \$24,000 for the after-school tutoring program and \$31,200 for an academic achievement program, Alachua County spokesman Mark Sexton said.

Though the agency was approved for the same CAPP program for 2015-2016, those contracts had not been formally executed, said Lee Roberts, the county's CAPP program manager.

Naylor and Lowe both said there were cuts to annual state Department of Education grants the organization had received in the past, but the Sun couldn't confirm the amounts Thursday.

Naylor said the local agency not paying its national dues or turning in Form 990s, the tax return form required of tax-exempt organizations, to the national office also raised flags for her. She said those duties fell to Lowe.

Greg Zweber, affiliate support director for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, said he could not confirm if the local organization had paid its dues.

He also wouldn't confirm if the agency was out of compliance, though he said the national office gave the agency “a notice of some things that needed to get caught up on” in early November.

Naylor said, and Hayes agreed, that the things the agency needed to catch up on included paying off back payrolls, unpaid bills and returning the agency to financial stability.

By the time the national office was involved, Lowe had resigned.

After Lowe's resignation and with the closure looming, the unpaid staff slowly trickled away.

The last one standing, Naylor made nearly 170 calls to tell volunteers and participants the agency was closing.

This fall, the agency had 66 open Big/Little matches, as well as 20 students in the Littles Study Hall program and 25 students in the Second Chance Program for juvenile criminal offenders.

“All of our programs had been going well, going strong,” Naylor said. “That has been one of the toughest things, the staff fought so hard to keep the program going strong.”

Despite the 66 open matches, the Alachua County School district noticed a decrease in the number of mentors at about 10 partner schools in recent years, said Jackie Johnson, the school system's spokeswoman.

Eighty-four Bigs were registered as mentors in schools in 2013-2014, which dropped to 11 for the 2015-2016 school year. The schools that typically hosted such mentors had none this year, she said.

Staff members are exploring their legal options to collect their back pay, which Naylor estimates to be at least \$25,000. She said her last paycheck was from Sept. 15.

Lowe said he had not received his paychecks, either.

Bigs and Littles are encouraged to continue meeting, Naylor said, but they will no longer be covered under BBBS insurance or have anyone to offer guidance.

Parents received the news compassionately, she said, though many continue to call and ask about the organization's annual holiday party.

“I want to make sure the agency is shut down properly,” said Naylor. “They are all volunteers, they didn't have to volunteer. Shutting them down is not what I wanted.”

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