

DRINKING WATER STANDARDS / ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUES

A first for charity -- \$1 million grant for drinking water

Dirty water called threat to poor communities

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By Wyatt Buchanan, staff writer

A Palo Alto philanthropist announced Friday a \$1 million grant to start an innovative program to bring clean drinking water to some of the world's poorest communities.

Wynnette LaBrosse is donating the money to WaterPartners International, a nonprofit group based in Kansas City, Mo.

The World Health Organization calls the lack of access to clean water a major threat to human health and reports that diarrhea alone accounts for 4 percent of premature death and disability worldwide, affecting mainly children. Overall, 1 billion people don't have access to clean water.

The grant will start a "water credit" program, a mix of charity and entrepreneurship where communities are given money to build pipes and wells and then pay back the costs with the money they have saved.

"People will no longer have to watch their children get sick and die," LaBrosse said in an interview.

Easy access to clean water also means people do not have to spend exorbitant amounts of money and time to secure water, said Gary White, executive director of WaterPartners.

"Water is the basic building block for economic development to happen," White said. The money first will be used in India, Bangladesh and Kenya.

In some areas, people have to walk two hours one way -- and then stand in line for two hours -- to buy water, White said. In developing countries such as Haiti, kiosks sell dirty water for 2 cents a glass. By comparison, 2 cents buys 170 glasses of tap water in San Francisco.

Through the water credit program, WaterPartners will loan money to other nongovernmental organizations already working in the targeted areas. They will direct the construction of the system, piping water from the city's supply into underground wells near the slum. Residents use hand pumps to get water and pay a fee for access.

Each well will cost between \$20,000 to \$25,000, White said, which includes costs for materials, education and maintenance.

The fee for access will include money to repay those loans. Varying interest rates, 8 to 10 percent in a country like India, will protect against inflation and loan defaults and ensure the fund for projects doesn't run out, he said.

That model, called micro-lending, has been used by other nonprofit organizations to speed the advancement of the developing world, but this is the first instance of its use for water, said LaBrosse, 50, who is donating the money through her Agora Foundation.

The \$20 million fund is part of the Peninsula Community Foundation of San Mateo. LaBrosse and her ex-husband Frank Levinson, who founded Silicon Valley's Finisar Corp., managed the Celerity Foundation until the couple divorced. She started Agora two years ago.

In addition to these programs, WaterPartners also gives basic grants for construction of water infrastructure in the poorest communities.

"But millions of people go without because there is not enough grant money to go around," White said.

LaBrosse says she wants to help provide access to clean water because it is one of the most basic resources. She was drawn to WaterPartners because of the credit program that would make her donation help more people.

"The tree of life gives sustenance, the rhythm of life gives spirit, but without the water of life there is nothing," she said.

One focus of her foundation is women's issues, and water gathering often is the responsibility of young women. She hopes that easy access to clean water means these girls have time for education, among other benefits.

"The water conditions will not only change, the living conditions change," LaBrosse said. In December, she plans to visit communities receiving the loans. #

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