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Rough economy doesn't slow Somerset County United Way holiday gift drive

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The organizers of the Somerset County United Way Gifts of the Season — the 19th annual holiday drive for needy individuals and families — started to worry two months ago when news of a rough economy kept rolling in.

They worried that there would be an increase in need but a decrease in gifts as people started to feel the pinch in their own wallets, said Lisa Galonardo, Somerset County United Way's assistant vice president of community and volunteer services. Galonardo, Somerset County United Way volunteers and staff and other partners including the Food Bank Network of Somerset County started to reach out to more people, asking to get an extra gift for someone in need.

The efforts worked. Volunteers are busy counting the donations in a Middlebrook Crossings Industrial Center warehouse loaded with gifts, showing that more people were willing to help this year, said Philip Brown III, Somerset County United Way's president and CEO. This year, they expect more than 14,000 gifts — with an estimated value of \$250,000 — to be delivered to those in need.

INCREASED NEED

The donations will help 5,000 families — an increase of 250 from 2008, Brown said. Each of the gift recipients were vetted through the Board of Social Services, the Food Bank Network of Somerset County or 28 other nonprofit organizations who referred them, Brown said.

Galonardo and Marie Scannell, executive director of the Somerset County Food Bank Network, speculated that more people were willing to help this year because they know so many people are hurting economically. For many, being on the brink of need has become a reality — perhaps some who donated have a spouse who lost a job, or they have a neighbor whose home is in foreclosure.

"They are making sure they're doing something for someone else," Scannell said, during a tour of the Gifts of the Season operation in the Middlebrook Crossings warehouse, which on Monday was loaded with toys and numerous boxes of wrapping paper.

Most of the gifts were marked with a child or senior citizen's name. There was a corner of generic gifts — from bicycles to Barney the dinosaur — for last-minute requests that will be fielded on Saturday. People who need help this holiday season, but were not noticed by the 30 social service agencies who help connect needy families to the gift drive — can pick up a request form on Saturday, Galonardo said.

CORPORATE CARE

More than 80 companies participated in the drive, Brown said. For example, Chubb took 1,000 tags for the company's employees to buy gifts.

Galonardo said individuals, houses of worship, community organizations and more also rallied around the cause. The operation will continue to accept new, unwrapped toys until Friday, Dec. 19, she said.

The United Way honored Advance Realty during the tour Monday, which included dignitaries such as local officials and Rowena Madden of the Governor's Office of Volunteerism for donating space that served as a Santa's workshop of sorts for the Gifts of the Season operation.

By the end of the campaign, which ends Saturday with a distribution to the parents picking up the donated gifts, 500 volunteers will come to sort and check the items before sending them on their way. The parents will each get some wrapping paper, too.

It's a tough job keeping the Thomas the Tank Engine and the Barbie dolls straight, but volunteers such as Stephanie Leon and Toni Hahn of Ortho McNeill's Titusville campus were checking their lists to make sure every child received their wish.

"Pretty much everyone got what they wanted," Leon of Ewing said.

The needy families will also receive a food basket with a ham or turkey and holiday meal fixings from the Food Bank Network of Somerset County, which is accepting donations to its holiday meal drive until Tuesday, Dec. 22. As a "green" Christmas bonus, Help Light New Jersey, provided a bag of six energy efficient light bulbs for each of the families. The bulbs, which are expected to last 10,000 hours, are estimated to save each family \$400 in electric bills during the lifetime of the bulb, said Bernie Erickson of Middletown, whose son, Matt, created the charity.

Additional Facts

At A Glance

Drop off a new, unwrapped toy to the Somerset County United Way Gifts of the Season drive.

WHEN: From 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. today and tomorrow; from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 18 and Friday, Dec. 19.

WHERE: The Gifts of the Season headquarters, Middlebrook Crossing Industrial Center, next to the Somerset County Food Bank Network, 10E Easy St., Bridgewater.

HOW MUCH: Donations of canned meats such as tuna, Spam, chicken, corned beef, soups and stews, Parmalat milk, and holiday meal trimmings including fresh oranges and apples.

MORE INFO: If you need holiday gifts for your children this season, come to the warehouse from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 20, at 10E Easy St., Bridgewater, to get a request form.
