



Not a time to stop helping others

County charities still need help making holiday season bright for less fortunate

By Kyveli Diener

San Mateo County Times

Posted: 12/19/2008 07:46:53 PM PST

Whether one is giving thanks or giving gifts, generosity is a holiday tradition on par with decorating a Christmas tree or lighting a menorah. As families delicately wrap presents for their loved ones, kin of a different sort — charities, safety personnel and nonprofits — are preparing to provide thousands of people throughout the county with a happy holiday.

These organizations rely on donations from strangers to help those in need of everything from warm coats to toothbrushes. But because of America's wounded economy, philanthropists are witnessing a terrifying conundrum: The number of people who desperately need help just to survive is rapidly increasing as the amount of people willing and able to give plummets.

While some organizations are seeing an increase in donations as a response to the troubled times, others report a drastic drop in much-needed contributions. But advocates for the disadvantaged aren't giving up without a fight, and residents countywide have bountiful opportunities to help the unemployed, the homeless, the hungry, children of all ages and animals. Here are some examples:

Samaritan House

Samaritan House has been providing resources to low-income families in San Mateo County since 1974. The organization is approaching the holidays with a multipronged strategy to garner donations. In addition to the monetary donations, toys and bicycles they accept at their San Mateo headquarters, Samaritan House hosted two donation initiatives at Hillsdale Mall, the One Warm Coat drive and the Giving Tree.

Annual Giving Manager Lynn Engel said that applications for the organization's services have all increased since last year. Need for rental assistance has increased 30 percent, requests for food are up 54 percent, the number of people who came to the community Thanksgiving dinner went up 60 percent, and more people had signed up for assistance through the holiday program by the end of November than in both November and December 2007 combined.

One area of concern for Samaritan House this holiday season is toys. In particular, the organization is short on toys for children under 2 years old and those ranging in age from 6 to 12, according to Sharon Petersen, director of program operations. The nonprofit also is short on presents for teenagers, such as gift certificates, gently used bikes and sports equipment.

People wishing to make donations can drop off new, unwrapped toys and gifts to the Samaritan House Holiday Toy Shoppe from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. until Wednesday at 1515 S. Claremont St., in San Mateo.

With almost 1,100 families already signed up for the program, Samaritan House expects to provide food and gifts for about 4,000 people, said volunteer Nancy Carothers.

"I think people are really trying to do something," Engel said. "We are seeing people really reaching deep into their pockets and giving no matter what. We do try to have people feel that anything they can give is valuable and makes somebody's holiday a lot brighter."

East Palo Alto Police Department

"That's what makes my day, to see their faces light up," said Vickie Porter, who oversees the holiday toy drive at the East Palo Alto Police Department, of the children who receive the gifts.

Porter said that last year the Police Department was able to provide each of the more than 300 children who came to the station on Christmas morning with two or three gifts and a book or stuffed animal. The department was able to purchase bicycles with donated money and raffle them off to several children.

This year, donations are scarce and only a couple bags of toys sit in the unfilled donation barrels. Porter attributes the drop in donations to the floundering economy.

"In the past, it seemed like we had a little more," she said. "Before we thought we didn't have anything, but we did compared to what we have now."

Porter is pleading with the public to help with the toy drive. She said she is considering what to do if the donations remain too low to host the Christmas morning giveaway. She said the bike raffle may not happen, and that donated gifts may be restricted only to families who have been victims of crime or to random recipients on the streets.

Porter said she is trying to stay positive about the toy drive.

"I'm just going to believe it's going to get better," she said.

Habitat for Humanity

Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco, the local chapter of the 32-year-old international nonprofit, serves the Peninsula. The organization is currently working to provide low-income families with ownership housing in Redwood City, where eight homes are expected to be completed by the summer.

"It's a really tough time for the families who we are targeting," said Jennifer Doettling, a Habitat for Humanity spokeswoman. "We work with folks who are desperately in need of new housing. Some people are living in really deplorable conditions."

Doettling said people can help the organization through monetary donations or by volunteering their time at the construction site, which she said is "by far the most popular" choice. She said there are opportunities for businesses to give in-kind donations of goods or services, such as donating a door, a can of paint, or labor at the construction site.

"We encourage in-kind donations of service or items that could be used in our homes," Doettling said. "Sometimes, for construction companies, that's a really useful way to connect with the community and give back to the community."

Peninsula Humane Society

The Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA rely entirely on donations to provide food, shelter, and medical services to the hundreds of homeless animals in their care.

In addition to monetary donations made directly to the organization, the Humane Society uses profits from Pick of the Litter, its secondhand store in Burlingame, to benefit the animals.

Spokesman Scott Delucchi said the Humane Society hasn't seen a decrease in donations due to the economy, and that there is no shortage of volunteers. Adoptions of both cats and dogs are also strong with an average of about 50 adoptions every weekend.

"People are still finding room in their hearts to give a little for the animals," he said. "We're very, very thankful this time of year."

However, the Humane Society is still reaching out to county residents with a unique new program to solve a major problem.

Delucchi said the Humane Society is currently housing 450 cats in need of homes, which is 100 more cats than it had at this time last year. This month the agency introduced 21 Days of Christmas, a new program to tackle the overcrowding.

Through the program, people can provide a cat with a foster home for three weeks. Delucchi said the program benefits everyone involved, giving the cats a relaxing time away from the stressful shelter environment, allowing Humane Society personnel to learn more about how each cat functions in a home environment.

The short-term foster parents may also find a lifelong friend if they bond with the feline and choose to keep it. More than 20 cats have found foster homes through the program so far, and the rest are available for the three-week foster period throughout the holiday season.

Children's Fund of San Mateo County

The Children's Fund of San Mateo County has been providing disadvantaged children and their families with many services for 35 years. Director Al Teglia said as many as 4,000 children are served every year through the agency's holiday donation program, but this year he is asking county residents to look further into the future with their philanthropy through a family sponsorship.

"These families right now are in need of support far beyond the Christmas holiday," Teglia said. "That's why I'm pushing and really advocating for adopting a family."

Teglia said job losses over the past year have caused an increase in the amount of families asking the Children's Fund for help. He said those in need are both working-poor families and unemployed middle-class families, and that while monetary donations and toys for

Christmas are appreciated, donations of basic goods like diapers and laundry detergent are most essential.

Donations from the public have been increasing alongside the escalating demand from needy families, Teglia said. He attributes the rise in donations with people's knowledge that every dollar donated to the Children's Fund is unaffected by administrative costs, so it all goes directly to the families.

Teglia said he wants people to get involved with the underprivileged families he works with so they can connect faces with the needs of less fortunate people. He offered donors a model in a sixth grade class from Tierra Linda Middle School in San Carlos, which raised \$800 through bake sales to sponsor a family with triplets.

"I will accept donations all year round," Teglia said. "They're hungry every day of the year."

Second Harvest Food Bank

The Second Harvest Food Bank of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties is the seventh largest food bank in the country and has been providing food to about 176,000 people each month for 35 years.

Spokeswoman Lynn Crocker said requests for food have increased this year by 55 percent. However, the support the agency receives and relies on from corporations has dropped by 50 percent. Crocker said it is already obvious that the food bank is "behind" in the amount of donations collected compared with last year.

Crocker said Second Harvest raised its goal totals this year to match the increase in food requests. In 2007, the agency set a goal of collecting \$5 million and 1.5 million pounds of food. This year, it aims to garner \$8 million in donations and 1.7 million pounds of food. The agency had achieved only one-quarter of that goal with two weeks to go before Christmas.

"It's a very precarious situation, so we're really needing to put the call out to individuals to do whatever they can," Crocker said. "Every bit helps."

Crocker said the agency is seeing an increase in monetary donations compared with food donations, and added that she assumed people found it easier to donate money than food. She said money is also beneficial because Second Harvest has "really high purchasing power" to stretch every dollar to its maximum potential.

For those who find themselves too strapped for cash to donate, Crocker suggested forgoing morning coffees or dining out for a week, and donating the saved funds to Second Harvest.

"Little sacrifices definitely would be a big help," she said.

Society of St. Vincent de Paul of San Mateo County

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been helping deprived people worldwide since the 19th century. This year, the San Mateo County branch of the agency is focusing on homelessness prevention while simultaneously attempting to provide about 4,000 Christmas presents to the children of families in need.

Executive Director Lorraine Moriarty said the organization is working primarily with the homeless and the working poor, who she said are most affected by the economic downturn.

Moriarty said the society has been focusing on homelessness prevention centers and rental assistance, and that the requests for such aid have doubled in the past year from \$25,000 a month to \$50,000 a month. She added that the number of people lining up for food every day has increased by 20 percent to 25 percent, with more than 275 meals served daily.

Like the Children's Fund, Samaritan House, Habitat for Humanity, and other charities, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul accepts donations throughout the year, and Moriarty said it is too early to see if the amount of donations will increase or decrease this year.

She said she is asking primarily for "basic survival needs" to be donated, including underwear, socks, rain ponchos, and sleeping bags.

"We're very hopeful, because of the generosity of people in San Mateo County historically, that they will continue to respond in this way," Moriarty said. "The most precious thing people can give us is their time."

San Mateo County Fire Department

The San Mateo County Fire Department is accepting donations at eight fire stations throughout the Peninsula. The donations of food, toys, and money benefit Coastside Hope, a nonprofit organization that provides assistance to low-income families, the working poor, and seniors along the coast.

Fire Captain Mark Colbert has been the department's donations manager for five years. He said the stations started accepting items and checks the day before Thanksgiving, and said it is too early in the program to tell if donations will increase or decrease from past years because "usually we don't see big amounts coming in until right before Christmas."

Like the Children's Fund, Colbert said Coastside Hope has a family adoption program that provides needed services to about 800 families. The organization's Web site said the agency assists about 3,000 men, women, and children every year. Colbert acknowledged that many people are experiencing hard times this year, but encouraged people to try giving something to the less fortunate.

"We know everyone's hurting, but every donation is appreciated," he said. "It's tough on everyone and it's always hard to see anyone go hungry or not get a chance to have a little bit of joy this time of year."