

Charities plead for more help this Christmas

Need for donated gifts has grown dramatically



Charities such as the House of Peace are getting record numbers of requests for assistance this holiday season, according to Gerri Sheets-Howard, House of Peace executive director. In the photo above, taken outside the House of Peace on Nov. 22, people leave the charity with boxes and bags of food. (Catholic Herald photo by Allen Fredrickson)

If you want to help:

Catholic Charities

Sharon Brumer
3501 S. Lake Drive
P.O. Box 070912
Milwaukee, WI 53207-0912
(414) 769-3543

Donors who would like to help with the Christmas Giving Program to adopt families or donate gifts can visit the website www.ccmke.org for more information. You may also fill out forms online to participate. Alternatively, call Catholic Charities to set up donation opportunities.

House of Peace

Province of St. Joseph
- House of Peace
1702 W. Walnut
Milwaukee, WI 53205
(414) 933-1300

<http://www.houseofpeacemilwaukee.org/index.shtml>

Christmas Clearing House of Waukesha County

P.O. Box 34
Waukesha WI 53187-0034
(262) 549-6635

<http://christmasclearingcouncil.org/about-us>

She dressed in unfamiliar clothes and shrouded her head, so as not to be recognized. The woman, a recently unemployed Milwaukee Public School staff member, hesitantly forged her way into the House of Peace looking for a bit of help. She broke down in tears when she asked executive director, Gerri Sheets-Howard, for some food to feed her family.

"This was a new experience for her," said Sheets-Howard. "She didn't want anyone to recognize that she was coming here seeking help. We helped her out with some food and a few words of encouragement. This was the best we could do at the time."

Not long after this request, Sheets-Howard received a referral from another agency regarding an individual behind on his mortgage due to a work-related injury that did not allow him to work for several months.

"The mortgage arrears were such that we were not able to assist to the extent that would satisfy the mortgage holder," said Sheets-Howard. "I also received a referral from another agency requesting Christmas toys for a mother of four. Even though we have reached the total amount of families that we can reasonably assist, this situation warranted that we include these children as well. As Br. Booker (Ashe) would always say, 'It's amazing what the Lord can do!'"

Unfortunately, this Christmas season looks to be bleak for many families throughout the archdiocese unless some

generous elves step forward to help. Similar to other organizations, the House of Peace is getting record numbers of requests for holiday assistance this year. Each year, the organization holds a food and toy drive, providing food for 1,000 families and gifts for more than 2,000 children. This year, the need is greater.

"I am sure that the economy, layoffs, downsizing, the unemployment rate and lack of adequate job training opportunities are playing a role in the increase in demand this year," said Sheets-Howard. "We are doing the best we can at this time; we are asking donors to increase their holiday support so that we can meet the needs of the poor during the holidays."

For Catholic Charities, the need for Christmas gift assistance has increased by a third. Last year, the agency provided gifts for 2,000 of Milwaukee's poorest and most vulnerable individuals, and this year, the requests have topped 3,000.

In addition to job loss and underemployment, many struggle with increasing costs of everyday living expenses, explained Sandy Leske, Catholic Charities advancement director.

"Prices for basic items have gone up, such as gas, food and energy, which places additional financial burdens on those already struggling to make ends meet," she said. "Paying extra for basic items leaves less money for Christmas presents and cold weather gear for children and families."

These increased prices, along with a struggling employment market and stag-

nant economy, have created much smaller pay increases for the employed, as opposed to big increases in the cost of living, placing more financial stress on working families.

As with the House of Peace, Catholic Charities is seeing new clients who, until recently, were earning good salaries, but who were either laid off or let go. Now, many are employed again, but at half the salary; the other half continue to look for work, while their unemployment benefits are running out.

"This has brought us additional clients throughout the year, people who make too much annually to qualify for any benefits, but who definitely are struggling like those who are losing their homes," said Leske. "We receive most of our clients from word of mouth or through their parishes. Some even were previous donors and are now struggling and need our services."

In order to meet the growing needs, Catholic Charities is pleading for additional help from parishes, individuals, families, companies or groups to provide gift items for needy families.

"We definitely are in need of people to donate gift items," said Leske. "At this time, we have enough gifts to provide for about half the individuals who are seeking help. We have a long way to go to meet the needs of the other 1,500 individuals."

At the Christmas Clearing Council in Waukesha County, the theme is similar to Catholic Charities and House of Peace in that the need for help has dramatically increased. For more than 60 years, the

Christmas Clearing Council has been helping children initially through its Empty Stocking Club. Last year the program coordinated giving to more than 4,500 children in the county.

The Waukesha community as a whole is struggling due to unexpected job loss, death of wage earners, divorce, abandonment, illness, disability or other crises.

Without the help of volunteers and outside help, the children might not experience the joy of Christmas. Those interested in helping can select their desired level of involvement by choosing to sponsor a family, donate new toys or money, organize community service projects or volunteer in the center.

Backed by numerous churches, including St. Joseph Parish, Waukesha, schools, businesses and other organizations, the CCC needs additional volunteers to provide a Merry Christmas for Waukesha County's littlest residents. According to long-time volunteer Peggy Troestler, this year's needs are greater than last year.

"It seems like each year the needs have increased," she said. "We are asking for extra donations from our regular volunteers, but could really use help from new donors. We are always in need of gifts and financial help. There are several toy sites throughout Waukesha County that people can drop their gifts, and if people want to give money, they can call us and set it up. We need gifts for anyone from birth through high school."