

Christmas Neighbors seeks family adopters

By Pam Chickering Wilson, Union staff writer | Posted: Friday, November 28, 2014 9:17 am

JEFFERSON — Just as participation in Christmas Neighbors has risen dramatically over the six-plus decades of the Jefferson County charity's existence, so has participation in its Adopt-a-Family Program.

And growing need means more community sponsors must step up to help make the season bright for participants. As of last week, 42 needy families who had applied for the Adopt-a-Family program had not been adopted yet.

The Rev. Clarence "Pop" Wendt, a Methodist pastor and probation officer from Lake Mills, established Jefferson County Christmas Neighbors in 1952. It initially provided toys for needy Jefferson-area children at Christmastime. Over the years, it has grown to serve more and more families, along the way adding food and clothing distribution and the Adopt-a-Family program.

When the charity first incorporated as a nonprofit organization, it served around 140 families. Last year, the overall program, which provides Christmas toys, food, clothing and other extras to make the holiday season bright for those in need, served 643 families, representing some 1,700 children.

The Adopt-a-Family program, meanwhile, has grown from 39 participating families in 1987 to 223 families last year, representing 559 children.

Adopt-a-Family caters to an entire needy family, including the fixings for a Christmas meal, and gifts for all of the children, chosen according to the child's age and interest. Many sponsors also go above and beyond, providing extras like gas cards, fresh-baked cookies, Christmas decorations, a live Christmas tree, or food items to meet the family's needs beyond the holiday.

"Every year, there are a few we have to turn down because we just don't have enough sponsors to serve everyone. Those families then get to go into the general toy distribution program," said Jan Tremain, who stepped in as vice president for Christmas Neighbors this year.

Adopt-a-Family applications still are coming in through the deadline of Dec. 5. After that time, Christmas Neighbors will match families with sponsors from the community — sometimes private citizens, sometimes businesses or organizations — to make the family's Christmas merrier.

Tremain said that a lot of the families who apply for the Adopt-a-Family program don't have reliable transportation and aren't sure they can get to the distribution site, at the Jefferson County Fair Park Activity Center.

"Christmas Neighbors serves families from all over Jefferson County," Tremain said. "We have people from Waterloo, Ixonia, Palmyra, Fort Atkinson, Jefferson, Watertown, Cambridge and even the Jefferson County portion of Whitewater," she said.

Lorna Lovett, who took over this year as Christmas Neighbors head after the retirement of longtime head Helen Stowe, said that the general trend upward correlates with tighter economic times, with the cost of living rising

faster than wages.

“You have to make so much more these days to make ends meet,” Tremain said.

The Christmas Neighbors coordinators said that it is tremendously rewarding to be involved in an organization that is making a difference in people’s lives, relating numerous comments and reflections from recipients as well as volunteers.

Tremain said that they heard last week from a man who had lost his job and had sole custody of his children. He did not know how he was going to make ends meet and was so grateful to learn about this program, which could restore the family’s dreams of a traditional Christmas.

Lovett related a phone call from an applicant to the program who wanted their own children to become involved on the volunteer side as they grew older.

“A lot of applicants also want to help with the set-up, because they want to give of their time,” Lovett said.

“The other day, we got a call from an Adopt-a-Family sponsor who wanted to help a family with kids who were 4 to 5, about the same age as her kids,” Tremain said. The potential sponsor said her own daughter had had a “meltdown” recently about things she wanted but could not have, and their family decided it would be good to have those young kids help shop for others who did not have the same blessings.

“She wanted her kids to realize that Christmas is not just about receiving. They need to learn about giving, too,” Tremain said. “Dick and I have adopted families in past years, and some of the families have invited us in for hot chocolate and conversation,” Lovett said.

Neither Lovett nor Tremain has volunteered with Christmas Neighbors for long, but as involved community members, they were aware that it made a huge difference in people’s lives.

Lovett got involved a few years ago. Knowing she was retired, Carol Brandel recruited her to serve on the board. Tremain, a former teacher, also started volunteering after she retired.

“It’s a cause I really believe in,” she said. “Of course, I didn’t expect to become vice president.”

Calling herself a “Christmas person,” Tremain said that the memories and traditions she and her family have created at Christmastime mean a great deal to her, and she wants everyone to experience the kind of Christmas she and her family have.

Lovett and Tremain stepped up to their current positions earlier this year after Stowe, 87, retired after many decades running Christmas Neighbors. They said they couldn’t do it without the contributions of countless volunteers, many of whom also have committed decades to the Jefferson County charity.

“It’s a well-oiled machine,” Lovett said.

“Being vice president of Christmas Neighbors has given me a tremendous respect for these volunteers,” Tremain said. “I’ve also learned how generous the local community is.”

Throughout its 62 years of existence, Christmas Neighbors’ philosophy has been “for the children,” Tremain said. “That’s what founder Pop Wendt envisioned and what Helen Stowe carried on for so many years.”

The two organizers said that the coordination that takes place between the initial hours of set-up and the opening of distribution the next day is incredible.

“It’s just chaos at the beginning, but by the end of the day, the Activity Center looks like you walked into a combination of Toys R Us and the biggest grocery store you could imagine,” Lovett said. “All the help we receive, from adults and high school students, is just amazing.”

Christmas Neighbors has no paid staff, and is entirely volunteer-driven.

During the past couple of decades, the need for Christmas Neighbors has grown, but so has the generosity of the local community, which has stepped up in so many ways to provide a happy holiday for the county’s neediest families.

Planning for the charity takes place year-round, by 12 board members. As registration begins each year, another two-dozen-plus volunteers step up to man phones and take applications. Later, sponsors, donors, translators and on-site volunteers all fill their roles.

For many years, the Jefferson High School Student Council has spearheaded a massive food drive for Christmas Neighbors, as well as sending students to work at Christmas Neighbors, loading and unloading, doing set-up and, in some cases, translating for Spanish-speaking recipient families.

For the past couple of years, the School District of Johnson Creek also has hosted a food drive for the event and has sent volunteers, some 20 students plus staff members, to help set up on the day before the distribution.

This year’s Christmas Neighbors set-up will take place on Monday, Dec. 15, and distribution will be Tuesday, Dec. 16. Applicants still can sign up through Dec. 5 by calling the Christmas Neighbors office at (920) 674-4499. There are lots of ways to help Christmas Neighbors. Adopt-a-Family sponsors still are being welcomed and also should sign up by phone at the above number.

The organization also has an email for inquiries about volunteering, donations or other questions. It can be reached at christmasneighbors@gmail.com

People also may check out its website at www.christmasneighbors.org.

There are numerous drop-off spots for donations throughout the county.

The items most in demand are used clothing, especially clothing for toddlers and small children and winter coats, hats, mittens, boots and other gear; wrapping paper, non-perishable food, and, of course, new toys. People can drop items off at all PremierBank and Badger Bank branches throughout the county, County-City Credit Union, Fort Community Credit Union, Grinwald Ford of Watertown, Snap Fitness in Fort Atkinson, Paragon Community Services in Fort Atkinson, Bark of the Town and the Rock Lake Activity Center in Lake Mills, and Shopko of Fort Atkinson.

People also may drop off donations at the Christmas Neighbors office, located in the old St. Vincent de Paul building at 164 W. Garland St., Jefferson.

Anyone wishing to donate to Christmas Neighbors may do so at any time. Monetary donations in any amount always are welcome and can be sent to Jefferson County Christmas Neighbors at P.O. Box 177, Jefferson, WI,

53549.