

Gift drive overwhelmed by community generosity ? but necessities are still in need



Somewhere in this community, a young mother is struggling to feed her six-month-old.

Living on limited resources, she's been facing tough decisions since she was told her baby had to go on an expensive formula for the next six months, resulting in a food bill of more than \$40 a day for the baby alone. As such, the mother has made the necessary adjustments to her family's budget. She's cut back on anything that is not necessary and prioritized her bills, but that isn't enough to make ends meet at this time of year.

Enter Neighbourhood Network's Holiday Gift Drive.

The annual campaign is working with its myriad non-profit partners throughout Northern York Region to make the holidays brighter for local families in need.

Through the campaign, partner organizations compile specific requests from their clients, and Neighbourhood Network takes on the challenge of collecting gifts, donations, and funds to make sure nobody is left behind.

With less than two weeks to go before the donation deadline of December 20, Neighbourhood Network says they are overwhelmed by the community's generosity this year, but notes there are still very simple requests they need help filling.

"This is one of the first years where, at this point, I had more sponsors and people wanting to help and contribute to our gift drive for people in need," Neighbourhood Network's Maggie Palmer told The Auroran on Monday morning. "I would have to place people on hold and tell them, 'Please wait because I know there is going to be an urgent request coming in.'"

At the start of the week, just about everyone who

Neighbourhood Network committed to looking after ? whether an individual, family, or even a non-profit organization ? had picked up their donations and some already have the community's contributions wrapped and around their Christmas trees.

?It makes me happy because normally I am scrambling to find sponsors and waiting to receive more donations,? Ms. Palmer continues, noting the wish lists of nearly 45 families have been fulfilled so far. ?We don't get a profile for every family, but the ones we do, we get a breakdown, almost a timeline, of how the family got to where they are and it doesn't take much. One bad accident kind of spirals. A lot of the times we find that food is the top of the list for everybody. The local food pantries do an incredible job and I know they serve a lot of people ? it is just that their doors aren't always open to fit the schedule of the person in need. They fall through the cracks and when they fall though the cracks they typically come to an agency that we support or come to us through the Town because they know we can support.?

As the December 20 deadline approaches (that's the ideal, Neighbourhood Network will still accept donations through the morning of Christmas Eve), their biggest needs remain baby formula, diapers and wipes.

?For single parents, and there tends to be a lot of them out there ? it's the infant and baby phase that people are struggling with,? says Ms. Palmer. ?Unfortunately, food pantries and agencies don't have a stockpile of these items. Winter gear for all ages is needed, right from newborns to seniors. Gently used is welcome, but new is preferred. The faster we get donations, the faster we can get them to people in need.?

For more information on the Neighbourhood Network Holiday Gift Drive, including needs listed by partner organizations, and drop-off locations in Aurora, King and East Gwillimbury, visit nnetwork.org/program/holiday-gift-drive or call 905-726-3737.

By Brock Weir