

Close to 90 families served after community answered Neighbourhood Network's call



The holiday season is one of emotion for the Neighbourhood Network team as they band together to make it merry for local families in need, and this year the community answered the call and helped make the wishes of more than 85 families come true.

But these weren't grandiose dreams. For many families referred by partner organizations this year to the Aurora-based non-profit which matches local volunteers with groups and individuals in need, their asks were as simple as soap, toilet paper and laundry detergent.

"This is our most special program," says Neighbourhood Network's Tanya Dennis, who led this year's Holiday Gift Drive. "It's such a busy time and we're constantly taking in donations and waiting for social workers to pick them up, and it just really hits home, even with people donating. A grandmother came in with her grandson and she was just shocked to see and hear about the fact so many people don't have food that she was crying at our door.

"This is a program we'll always do our best to support people in the community, but it's also nice to look back on it and to see how many families and how many individuals [benefited]."

Neighbourhood Network expected the referrals of between 80 and 100 families this season. It's a similar number to what they encountered in 2021, but markedly different from 2020 and earlier.

In 2020, just 45 families in need were referred to them.

"We know that the need continues to increase and we knew we would have lots of people reaching out," says Dennis. "Although Friday was our deadline, we had four more families we knew were submitting applications, which was very last minute, but we don't want to turn them down and we'll do our best to support them."

The communities in which Neighbourhood Network operates did their best to support them as well.

"We're very grateful for the support of our community," says Dennis noting that sports teams in particular really stepped up to the plate in a variety of ways in 2022, including collecting donations through teambuilding exercises, shopping excursions, and wrapping initiatives.

Sports teams are becoming ?really more engaged? in showing the importance of giving back to the communities in which young athletes reside, ?bringing awareness to the fact that their friend in school could be in need.?

?There're families now where you just don't realize it is happening so close to home and unfortunately it is. It's giving back where they live, which I think a lot of them are shocked to see. They don't understand that their friend might not have a Christmas dinner or gifts under their trees.?

Among the needs identified by participant families were baby needs such as diapers, formula, snow suits, jackets, and hats, as well as what Dennis describes as ?high requests for basic necessities? such as laundry detergent, food gift cards, and toiletries.

?We found a lot of people were happy to donate to the Holiday Helper bags we created,? says Dennis. ?It's simpler and they can just go out and buy household items, but we still found there were so many people in the community who want to buy gifts for kids. That was our number-one requests. Sports teams?picked kids about their age so they could have fun and go shopping and pick things the child would like, which was great to see.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter