



Meeting the need: Jackson nonprofits working to provide food, clothing and toys for low-income families during holidays

Tarryl Jackson The Jackson Citizen Patriot November 28, 2013

JACKSON, MI – Helping local families pay their heating bills, putting food on a families table and making sure a child has a winter coat are just some of the needs local nonprofits and organizations try to meet in Jackson County. As the holiday season gets underway, those agencies only see the need grow. Several nonprofits are pooling their resources together to try to help as many residents meet their basic needs of heat, food and clothing. They also hope to receive more help from businesses and community members to make sure those in need do not have to struggle as much through the holiday season.

Keeping the heat on in the home is a struggle for many Jackson County residents who call the **Community Action Agency** for help. The nonprofit – which provides education, housing and economic self-sufficiency programs to more than 21,000 residents in Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties – receives about 100 calls a week from people who need help paying their utility bill. “By the time they call us, they usually have a shut-off notice,” said Laura Reaume, program operations manager at Community Action Agency. “You’re just putting a Band-Aid on a broken arm.” Unfortunately the funding is not always available and people have to be turned away as a result. “Some days are pretty depressing,” Reaume said. “The hardest part of the job is when we don’t have any more (money) and there are limited resources.”

Feeding families in need

There are at least 25 food pantries that are open to those in need through churches, schools and other organizations in the Jackson County area, according to **the United Way of Jackson County**. About 92,000 pounds of food are delivered from the Food Bank of South Central Michigan, based in Battle Creek, to Jackson County per month. On Thursday, Nov. 21, **the food bank delivered more than 35,000 pounds of food to the area**, with 27 different organizations picking up food orders.

One of those churches, the food pantry at Immanuel Lutheran Church, has seen a gradual increase of clients in the past month. The pantry, which opens Saturday morning at 1505 W. Michigan Ave., serves an average of 270 families a week, with each family receiving between 10 to 12 pounds of food, said director Jack Gahagan. That number increased to more than 300 for Saturday, Nov. 16 and Nov. 23. “Part of that (increase), I think, is the reduction in food stamps,” Gahagan said. “The other part of that is, of course, the holidays. It’s been going up since early October.”

Since Oct. 1, **Central Michigan 211** has received 319 calls in Jackson County inquiring about food pantries out of more than 3,000 calls. Last year, during the same time period, the call center received 239 calls about food assistance out of more than 2,700 calls. There are more than 22,000 Jackson County residents – 8,000 of them children – who do not know where they will get their next meal, said Dan Salerno, director of fund development at the Food Bank of South Central Michigan. That need for food will continue to grow with cuts to federal food stamps and the state’s tightening of food-stamp eligibility requirements, Salerno said.

Since October 2011, when the Michigan Department of Human Services tightened food stamp eligibility requirements, 3,800 Jackson County residents no longer receive that benefit, Salerno said. “That’s approximately \$516,000 lost each month to the local food economy in Jackson,” he said in an email. As of Nov. 1, the cut to federal food stamps averaged between \$20 and \$36 per household, Salerno said. “Simply put, private charity cannot cover the huge gap that will happen as a result,” he said.

Paying the heating bill

Residents are starting to kick on their furnaces and other heating sources as temperatures begin to plummet. Unfortunately, not all residents are able to afford to keep the heat on and are facing shut-off. Since Oct. 1, Central Michigan 211 has received 265 calls for utility payment assistance. During the same time period last year, operators received 290 calls requesting help with utility bills. “A lot of the clients we see have an income; they’re working,” said Toby Berry, CEO of the Community Action Agency. “There’s not enough money to make ends meet.” The nonprofit starts campaigning for **its Walk for Warmth** after the first of the year. CAA teams up with **Consumers Energy** to raise money that goes toward helping residents pay for utilities. In February, the event brought in nearly \$30,000. Residents can donate to the program before the campaign kick-off.

Using state funds, Consumers Energy is piloting **the Consumers Affordable Resource for Energy**, or CARE program, that can provide customers with energy bill credits, as well as conduct an energy audit on homes. Customers can receive assistance before they get a shut-off notice in the mail. In addition, Central Michigan 211 wants residents in need to be aware a change to the State Emergency Relief applications. The state has designated the new “energy crisis season” from Nov. 1 to May 31 and will only accept applications for assistance between those dates.

“It takes more of your income to stay warm,” Berry said. “Sometimes there’s just not enough money. It’s not that you’re spending frivolously.”

Keeping families bundled up this winter

Making sure that children have a winter coat, boots and other necessary clothing for the season is a top priority for several organizations in the area. **The Salvation Army**, 806 E. Pearl St., is already seeing more families that need clothing and food this winter. Ryan Porter, social services director at Salvation Army, said the nonprofit received 608 holiday assistance applications by this time last year. “So far, we have received 714 applications,” Porter said. “That is a 17.4 percent increase over last year.” Through the Salvation Army’s seasonal needs program, between 1,300 and 1,600 families are provided with food and winter clothing. The nonprofit also teams up with **Toys for Tots** to give away new toys to children up to age 12. Salvation Army’s Red Kettle Campaign, which helps provide food

and emergency assistance to low-income residents, has raised about \$12,000 so far this season. This year's goal is to raise \$200,000.

So far, about 350 children have received coats, hats and other warm clothes through Community Action Agency's **Warm The Children program**. The nonprofit has spent \$28,000 to help 342 children and hopes to reach 500. The program accepts donations all year round. CAA has received tremendous support for its holiday programs from local businesses and community members, said spokeswoman Jessie Murray. For example, Eaton Aerospace has adopted a classroom of 16 children through CAA's Head Start program to provide their families with food, clothing and toys. "When they adopt a family, they meet the entire needs of the family," Murray said. "That's a commitment."

How to Help

Adopt a family: Many families from Community Action Agency's Head Start program are in need of winter clothing, food and basic toiletries. Those who are interested in adopting a family or making a donation can call Kristin Klug, children's program manager at Head Start, at 788-6010.

Donate money to buy food: The Food Bank of South Central Michigan serves about 30 different organizations in Jackson County. Residents can donate by sending a check to the Food Bank of South Central Michigan, P.O. Box 408, Battle Creek, MI 49016 or online at <http://www.foodbankofscm.org/Donate.aspx>.

If you are interested in donating to a specific food pantry, United Way of Jackson County also has a **list of food pantries** in the area on their website, www.uwjackson.org.

Help provide winter clothing for needy children: Those who are interested in donating to Warm The Children can visit www.caajlh.org and download the coupon. Donors are asked to mail their check with the coupon to Community Action Agency, Warm The Children Fund, 1214 Greenwood Ave., Jackson, MI 49203.

Help families with food and emergency assistance: The Salvation Army's Red Kettle Campaign is raising funds to provide low-income families with food and emergency assistance. There are volunteer bell-ringers accepting donations at several Jackson-area locations, including Kroger at 1100 W. Argyle St. and the U.S. Post Office at 113 W. Michigan Ave. Residents can also make a donation online at www.onlineredkettle.org/JacksonSalvationArmyCorps.

Give toys to local children in need: Toys for Toys in Jackson is hoping to provide 4,500 children with toys this holiday season. Those who are interested in donating are asked to drop off a new, unwrapped toy for a child up to age 12 by Dec. 18 at **several locations**, including McDonald's restaurants and The Toy House and Baby Too, 400 N. Mechanic St. To make a cash donation, checks can be made out to: Toys for Tots, P.O. Box 1648, Jackson, MI 49204. For more information, call Mike Brown at 581-0608.

