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COMMUNITY ACTION

Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency: How to help this holiday season



Coats await children at the Hilton Garden Inn in October for the Warm the Children coat giveaway.

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There is no magic bullet to help families overcome the complex factors that often contribute to poverty. But there are simple solutions to address immediate, basic needs — like providing a child with a coat to stay warm during their winter walk to school, or providing a family with food or gifts during the holiday season.

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to participate in Warm the Children coat distribution at the Hilton Garden Inn. Dozens of volunteers and community partners worked together to give away about 600 winter coats to children 12 and younger in Cayuga County. By a mile, this was the greatest number of children served in any given year in the history of Warm the Children. At one point, families were lined up out the door waiting patiently to check in and “go shopping” for their

children in the Hilton Garden Inn ballroom, where 1,000 coats — most purchased at deep discounts during last year's clearance sales — were neatly sorted and stacked on tables and racks.

Volunteers were on hand to respectfully assist families with locating appropriate sizes. Nearly every child walked out with a smile and a brand new coat that fit them perfectly.

Warm the Children is a growing partnership between The Citizen, Rotary Clubs of Cayuga County, and the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency. The initiative achieved great success this year because of dedicated volunteers; caring human service and school district professionals who made appropriate referrals on behalf of families in need; generous donations from individuals and sponsors including Arby's, the Hilton Garden Inn, Generations Bank, JC Penney, Sears, Steve Mueller Motors and Walmart; and key programmatic changes that allowed us to significantly increase the number of children served. Donations are needed to support next year's distribution and can be sent to The Citizen, c/o Warm the Children, 25 Dill St., Auburn, NY 13021.

On the heels of Warm the Children, our agency is involved in another community-wide initiative to provide for families in need during the holidays — Cayuga County Christmas Elf. Now in its 27th year, the Elf provides over 700 families and upwards of 2,000 children throughout the county with gifts for the holidays. Each child receives a large toy, a small toy, a stuffed animal, a reading book and a coloring book and crayons. Since many of these children receive meals at school, the Elf also provides each family a \$25 Wegmans gift certificate to help with increased food costs during the holiday break.

Christmas Elf relies on the generous support of its sponsors, including Auburn Party Rental, Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, Currier Plastics, Currier Racing, Downtown Books & Coffee and The Citizen; Elf committee volunteers; and hundreds of donors. Donations from local businesses, churches, individuals and other organizations make the difference for many who struggle with providing meals and gifts for their children during the holidays. Monetary donations can be made to the agency, c/o Christmas Elf, 89 York St., Auburn, NY 13021, or online through our secure website at <http://cscaa.com/christmaself.html>.

Toys can be dropped off at multiple sites including BJ's, Wegmans, Downtown Books & Coffee, The Citizen and the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency Site I at 89 York St. A variety of donations are welcome, including unused toys, books, games, clothing, warm weather clothing, toiletries and just about anything else that might be on a child's wish list; items for teenagers are especially needed.

Applications for the Christmas Elf are currently being accepted for families with children in need this holiday season. Referrals can be made through the child's school, the Cayuga County Department of Health and Human Services, or another human service agency within the county through Dec. 12. Late applications will be accepted for emergencies on a case-by-case basis. The agency is seeking Elf volunteers to help screen applications, return phone calls and pack last-minute boxes. Interested parties should call (315) 255-1703.

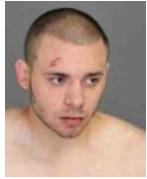
In addition to involvement in Christmas Elf and Warm the Children, our agency operates a food pantry that serves individuals and families countywide on a weekly basis. We are currently seeking donations of holiday specialty items including frozen turkeys, chickens, stuffing and potato mixes, pumpkin pie filling and crust, pudding mixes, cranberry and more. Donations can be delivered to 89 York St., Auburn, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.

Trish Ottley is the marketing and development director at the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency. She can be reached at (315) 255-1703 ext. 155 or tottley@cscaa.com.

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