

Greater need, fewer donors?

Charities say holiday sponsors for families in need may be harder to find

By **MICHELLE MANDEL**
THE OREGONIAN

HILLSBORO -

Jill is engaged and expecting her second child in January.

But on Sept. 25, her fiancé lost his job at a Washington County tech firm. He's looked for work, without success; the couple lives on the \$1,200 a month Jill makes at her clerical job. Half of that pays for their two-bedroom apartment in western Washington County, and another \$575 goes to child care. That leaves little for anything else.

Christmas looms, and Jill frets that she'll have nothing — a Christmas tree, presents or turkey dinner — for her 15-month-old daughter.

"I have no money for these things," says 31-year-old Jill, who doesn't want her last name used because she's embarrassed by her plight. "But I'd really like to have some toys for my little girl, so she'll have a Christmas."

With the state plunged into a recession, and layoffs affecting more Oregonians, organizers at the Oregon Food Bank in Washington County expect to hear a slew of such stories this holiday season. Many, like Jill, will apply for the food bank's annual holiday basket program, which matches needy folks with sponsors who typically provide a Christmas dinner and gifts for children.

Last year, the program helped 5,587

families, a 5 percent increase from 1999. But more than 500 families went without help, mostly because they applied too late, or suitable sponsors could not be found. This year, food bank organizers worry that even more families might go without Christmas.

The number of needy is rising, but the number of sponsors might not rise proportionately.

"We're not sure what's going to happen," says Mary-Louise Billings, coordinator of Oregon Food Bank Washington County's holiday basket program. "People are already giving to help New York."

"They may not have anything left to give."

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HOLIDAY BASKET PROGRAM

What: The Oregon Food Bank expects to match thousands of families with sponsors this Christmas in its holiday basket program, but representatives are concerned that the number of volunteers might not keep pace with the need. Sponsors typically provide supplies for a Christmas dinner and presents for children.

To get help: Applications may be picked up at local libraries or chambers of commerce throughout Washington County, and dropped off at the food bank, 21465 N.W. Jacobson Road, Hillsboro. They must be returned by Dec. 1.

To help out: To sign up as a sponsor, call 503-439-6510.

Charity: Many in middle class hurting

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It's a concern shared by charity groups nationwide this holiday season. People have donated millions of dollars to victims of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., leaving consumers with less to give to local charities. If dollars diminish or do not rise proportionate to the need, food bank organizers wonder how clients — some of them laid-off, middle-class workers who have never been in this situation before — will have a merry Christmas.

Billings hopes that people who feel overwhelmed by trying to help in what she calls the huge picture might do their part by helping a local charity. "Helping somebody locally might help people who are feeling depressed," she says.

Toward that goal, the food bank this year has set an earlier client sign-up deadline of Dec. 1 to provide more time to match sponsors and clients.

Clients can submit applications through Dec. 17, but they'll be put on a waiting list and will not be matched with sponsors until early applicants have been served, Billings says.

Sponsors can sign up through Dec. 17, but earlier sign-ups are encouraged.

In past years, the food bank accepted applications almost up to Christmas Day, not wanting to leave anyone out, Billings says.

But the food bank often experienced a last-minute surge in applicants, many of whom ultimately went unhelpt.

Last-minute applicants

Jeri Alcock of Community Action Organization in Hillsboro said that last year she heard from last-minute applicants who had no turkey, no gifts, no nothing.

"I wouldn't want to be in the food bank's shoes," says Alcock, noting that her organization refers its needy to the food bank for Christmas assistance. Most Washington County charities do likewise, to prevent overlap in giving.

"They have a real struggle with families calling just a few days before the holidays, needing help," she says. She hopes the new deadline remedies the situation. "They are heart-breaking calls, especially when nothing can be done."

It's easy to help or be helped. Clients and sponsors call the food bank, where a volunteer takes information. Or applications, available at local libraries or chambers of commerce, can be filled out and turned in.

Clients must meet federal poverty guidelines, and the food bank screens applications to prevent double-dipping, such as a husband and wife applying separately.

Sponsors and clients are matched based on wishes and needs. Some sponsors might want a family with lots of children; others prefer assisting a senior citizen.

733 sponsors last year

Last year, 733 sponsors signed up, with some, such as Intel and Nike employees, taking on a number of families. Sponsors call their families to gather more informa-

tion, such as toy suggestions or clothing sizes. Sponsors also ask families what food they want on Christmas Day, which varies greatly according to cultural backgrounds, Billings says.

But each sponsor decides just how much they want to give — an admittedly flawed system that showers bounty on some families and leaves others with the bare essentials, Billings says.

"The expectations are often very different on both sides of the coin," she says.

Sponsors typically deliver the gifts and food to the family a couple of days before Christmas. She says sponsors shouldn't think they're going to walk in with a Norman Rockwell Christmas and change someone's life.

"They can provide a happy Christmas," she says. "But when that day is over, the reality is, a lot of these families are going to be broke."

They also must withhold judgment, regardless of how well-off a recipient might seem.

"What the sponsor may not realize is the fancy car in the driveway is one week away from being repossessed, or that 60 percent or 70 percent of a single mother's in-

come is going toward her apartment," Billings says.

Some sponsors shy from more challenging families, such as those whose native language is not English. These families often go unmatched and must be helped by the food bank itself. This year Billings thinks the food bank will take on 500 or so last-minute or unmatched families, twice as many as in previous years.

That's a guess, but the best food bank organizers can do at this point. The food bank always accepts donations of food and money, in case someone wants to help but doesn't have time to shop as a sponsor.

"I certainly don't have a crystal ball," Billings says. "All we can do is try to develop programs that will help provide some food stability to families in the bad times ahead."

"Communities need to remain strong. We can't let people slide here at home."

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MICHAEL LLOYD/THE OREGONIAN

About 70 new families came to a recent food give-away at the Hillsboro Senior Center. The Oregon Food Bank serving Washington County says the number of needy has risen considerably in recent months as the economy has faltered and people have lost jobs. The food bank expects more families than ever to apply for its holiday food basket program this year.