http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/112212/saSM.png**That's the fear of local Salvation Army officials who are heading into the holiday season with few volunteers to raise money for charitable causes**

Unless volunteers step forward, the familiar sound of bells ringing at the Salvation Army kettles won't be heard very often this holiday season.

"Every year it's been getting more and more difficult to man the kettles," said Annastasia Harris, kettle campaign coordinator for Ozaukee County. "It's worse this year than it's been in the past.

"I have full weekends in December with no one to ring the bells."

The annual fund-raising drive begins Friday, Nov. 23, and runs through Christmas Eve.

Bell ringers are stationed at four locations — Sentry Foods in Port Washington, Walmart in Saukville, Shopko in Grafton and Piggly Wiggly in Cedarburg — on Fridays and Saturdays.

People are asked to man the donation kettles for a minimum of two-hour shifts. Only one person is needed per shift.

While many service organizations sign up to staff the kettles during the holidays, it is also a good family activity, Harris said, adding she often brings her grandchildren with her.

"I want them to understand that it takes a community to help each other," Harris said.

In the past, she's tried to fill many of the vacant shifts, Harris said, but her health won't allow it this year.

Money raised in Ozaukee County stays in the county, Harris said. Last year, the kettle campaign raised almost $34,000 — a record for the campaign, she said.

The agency works with other nonprofit organizations in the county to assist people in need, Harris said. The funds are used to provide basic needs, such as food, electricity, rent assistance, medication and other items.

The money also go toward the annual holiday toy drive, which provides Christmas gifts for 300 to 350 children annually, Harris said.

The Salvation Army in Ozaukee County generally serves between 250 and 350 families a year.

“A couple years ago, the people we were serving were more transient,” Harris said. “That changed two years ago. Today, we’re serving families where the husband or wife had a job for many years and now they’re out of a job.”

The two food pantries in northern Ozaukee County are finding similar situations.

Mark Gierach, executive director of the Saukville Community Food Pantry, said they have found their numbers — and the need for donations —increasing every month.

Since the beginning of the year, he said, the pantry has served more than 150 families, averaging 50 to 60 each month.

“We have people who are retired and live strictly on Social Security. We have some young families just starting out who have lost a job,” he said. “We have some business professionals who are living day-by-day because they lost their jobs.

“Some people we see here every month. Some are here once or twice.”

The pantry serves people from throughout Ozaukee County and is housed at St. Peter United Church of Christ. It has only been open since the beginning of the year, and as people become aware of the pantry, its client list has grown, Gierach said.

“We have some very generous people, but the need is always there,” he said. “The sad reality is even in good economic times, there are needs.”

At the Food Pantry in Port Washington, the need seems to have stabilized a bit, Executive Director Joy Dreier said — perhaps because some people are now going to Saukville’s pantry.

“What we’re seeing is very similar to what we saw last year,” she said. “That’s a very good thing.”

On an average week, the pantry serves about 125 households that represent 330 to 365 people, Dreier said.

“That’s a lot of people,” she said, many of whom are elderly or young people who can’t find a job. There are a number of clients whose unemployment benefits have run out and they still don’t have a job, she added, as well as disabled people on fixed incomes.

The pantry is gearing up for its Christmas season, stocking food, clothing and blankets and preparing its Gift a Child program. Applications for the program will be taken until Dec. 11,

Dreier said.

“It’s not getting any easier out there for people,” Dreier said.

To volunteer as a bell ringer, Port Washington and Saukville residents are asked to visit www.ringbells.org. Grafton and Cedarburg residents may call Harris at (414) 659-7226. Port-Saukville residents uncomfortable using the Internet may also call that number, Harris said.

Image Information: SALVATION ARMY BELL RINGERS like Annastasia Harris, who manned a kettle at last year’s Christmas on the Corner celebration in Port Washington, are a common sight during the holiday season. However, a shortage of bell ringers is worrying Harris, kettle campaign coordinator for the Salvation Army in Ozaukee County. Photo by Sam Arendt