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Volunteers who have turned out to man Salvation Army donation kettles restore charity's faith in the willingness of area residents to help those in need

The familiar jingling of bells can be heard in front of stores in Ozaukee County as the Salvation Army has found its ranks of bell ringers swelling.

"I had such a wonderful response," Annastasia Harris, kettle campaign coordinator for Ozaukee County, said this week. "My God, how wonderful. I appreciate it so much."

Just a few weeks ago, Harris was desperate for bell ringers, telling Ozaukee Press that the need was dire. There were weekends in December with no one to ring the bells at the four Salvation Army kettles in Ozaukee County.

After an Ozaukee Press story outlining the need, Harris said her phone started ringing. Now, there are only a few days in December where ringers are still needed.

Civic and youth organizations, as well as school groups, have volunteered to fill the need, Harris said, including students from Concordia University Wisconsin, Dunwiddie and Grafton elementary schools and elsewhere.

The Port Washington Leo Club, a youth group affiliated with the Lions Club, rang bells for an entire day, Harris said, and a group of Ozaukee County sheriff's deputies also helped out.

One woman who called to volunteer told Harris she normally just contributes money to the kettle campaign but felt compelled to volunteer her time this year. That's because her 90-year-old mother told her shortly before her death that, back in 1973, when the woman was a young girl, the family was having such a hard time the Salvation Army helped them pay the rent for a couple months.

"She didn't have a clue things were that bad," Harris said. "She said she wanted to give back.

"I stress out every year (about finding enough bell ringers) because I know how important the money we raise is. It's the make-or-break point for many people." Last year, the kettle campaign raised almost $34,000, Harris 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 goes toward the 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."

This year, the Salvation Army held a fill-the-truck campaign at Walmart for the first time — a few hours on Dec. 8 when people could buy toys and coats and donate them. The effort in Saukville brought in a dozen coats and three shopping carts of toys, Harris said.

Bell ringers in Ozaukee County 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.

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.