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Local Christmas charities work to make the season bright

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Lebanon Fire Department Capt. Brian Fountain, center, helps Wilson County Christmas For All President Rick Smith and board member Juli Kelley pick out gifts for a child on Thursday.

Ethan Steinquest/Lebanon Democrat

COVID-19 has left many local families behind on the bills and struggling to buy Christmas gifts for their children, but the spirit of giving remains strong in Wilson County.

Here are some of the ways neighbors are helping each other out this holiday season, from toy drives to food giveaways.

Wilson County Christmas for AllFor several years, Wilson County Christmas for All has helped families in Lebanon and Watertown find the perfect gifts for their children.

Volunteers spend the entire year hunting for deals on toys, so when the holidays come around there are plenty to choose from.

"Kids usually get \$75-90 worth of toys from us, so it's a pretty full gift," Wilson County CFA President Rick Smith said. "Right now we're looking at something like 1,500 to 1,600 kids, and we'll probably be between 2,500 and 3,000 by the time we get ready to start rocking and rolling."

The nonprofit buys gifts for children ages 0-15 regardless of income, and those interested can apply at the Department of Human Services on 155 Legends Drive through Dec. 11. Families will receive calls to pick up their gifts from Nov. 30 through Dec. 19, according to a CFA Facebook post.

"We haven't released a location yet, but will be releasing that shortly," Smith said. "We had to change the location due to the pandemic, so we'll be in a location where people can just drive up and we'll be able to walk to the cars individually."

CFA is also seeking volunteers to help with calls, distribution, toy donations and putting together gift bags for the children. Those interested in helping can call 615-680-9226.

"We always need two things: volunteers and money," Smith said. "We wouldn't be able to do this without the generosity of the people in Wilson County. We have one family that gives us \$5,000 every year just for bikes, they specify that you can't buy anything but bikes with that."

Bikes have become a highly sought after item amid COVID-19, and Smith said CFA was able to buy roughly half as many as usual. Other in-demand items include: NERF guns, scooters, skateboards, sporting goods, educational toys, science kits, art supplies, games, My Life As dolls, unicorns, books, Frozen dolls and gifts for kids 12-15.

The Salvation Army's Red Kettle campaign and Angel TreeDespite some initial concerns about cancellation, the Salvation Army's volunteers are greeting Christmas shoppers with bells this season.

The Red Kettle campaign is the Salvation Army's primary fundraiser and will continue through Christmas Eve at locations across the county like Walmart, Kroger and Hobby Lobby.

"For us, the most important thing I want people to know is that although the Salvation Army is an organization that does go out all over the world, each Salvation Army unit is tasked with caring for its own community," Sgt. Tom Freeman, the Salvation Army of Wilson County's director, said. "Whatever is raised in Wilson County is all that we have to then be able to serve our neighbors in Wilson County."

The proceeds are used for food and utility assistance, after-school programs for at-risk youth and other social services. One of those is the Angel Tree program, which allows Walmart shoppers to buy Christmas gifts for low-income families.

Community members can adopt an angel from an in-store tree display, or visit the Salvation Army of Wilson County's Facebook page for a link to the online registry.

"We have more people signed up for Angel Tree at this point this year than we have in the last couple years, so it's trending up for sure," Freeman said. "We've got local businesses and other churches that take it upon themselves at Christmas to call us and say 'hey, we really want to help out 40 angels this year.' And so we're grateful for partners like that."

The Salvation Army is also seeing a surge in requests for assistance and has contributed roughly \$40,000 to utility payments in the last month. Freeman said CARES Act distributions make up some of that amount and have allowed the organization to help more families than usual, but raising money through bell ringing is still a high priority.

"We ring it as many places as we have people to do it, so getting volunteers to come out is a big deal," he said. "If I don't have a person to do it I can't just set up a bucket and walk away. We need them more than ever this year because we've had a 150% jump in requests for assistance. It's a huge spike in people with need."

Those interested in volunteering can call the Salvation Army of Wilson County at 615-784-9555. Bell ringers typically work for two hours at a given location.

Joseph's Storehouse Food MinistryOne of Wilson County's largest food banks is serving up meals the week before Christmas through its monthly distribution.

"We're a little different from other food ministries in that we give away quite a bit more meat, because we do have a walk-in freezer," Joseph's Storehouse Food Ministry Director Benny Nolen said. "We'll do it on Thursday, Dec. 17 for the elderly and disabled and Saturday, Dec. 19 for the

general public."

Residents in need can stop by Joseph's Storehouse at 1960 S.E. Tater Peeler Road from roughly 8:30-11:30 a.m. on distribution days. Volunteers have been using a drive-thru setup amid COVID-19, and Nolen said the virus's economic impact is creating more need in the community.

"This past Thursday we had almost 240 families," he said. "The thing with the CARES Act and so many other things, like the stimulus checks, gave people more money to buy food. But we've seen an increase in people who've been displaced in their jobs or lost a job with downsizing."

Joseph's Storehouse primarily serves Wilson County but also offers food to residents of Smith, DeKalb and Trousdale counties.