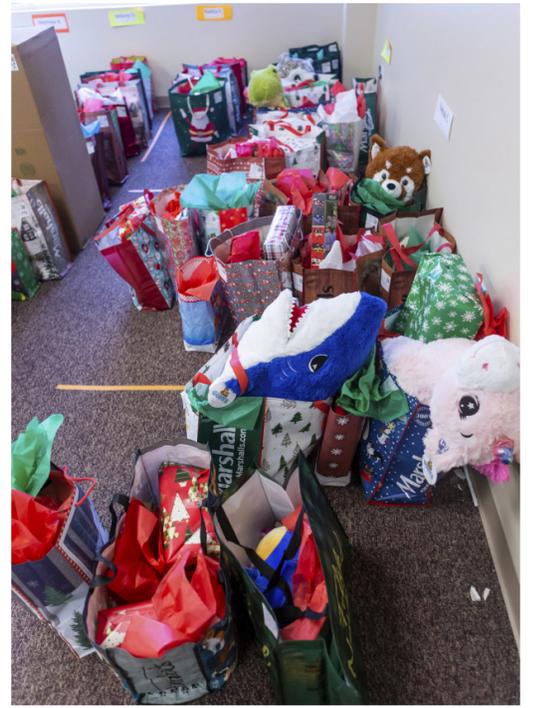


REGIONAL NEWS



Brandon Herman, a social worker, helps to gather presents for delivery for Operation Santa Claus, a volunteer gift drive that benefits hundreds of disadvantaged children in the care of the Lehigh County Office of Children and Youth Services. **BOB YURKO PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL**

‘We work up until Christmas Eve’ to help kids

Hundreds of Lehigh County children set to receive gifts via Operation Santa Claus

By Graysen Golter
The Morning Call

No extreme winter weather or even a pandemic is going to stop gifts from getting to children in need this holiday season. Not if the volunteers of Operation Santa Claus have anything to say about it.

This year, at least 700 children in the care of the Lehigh County Office of Children and Youth Services will be helped by the gift drive, which began in the early 1970s, according to 86-year-old volunteer and organizer Dolly Butz.

As of last week Operation Santa Claus was short of its goal — but that’s not dampening spirits.

“Right now, we don’t have gifts for [700] children, but

we’re calling our friends and calling anybody we can think of to support us,” she said.

“If there’s a child who lost their dad three days before Christmas and he’s not going to have a Christmas, he’s going to get one from us,” Butz said. “That’s what we do. We work up until Christmas Eve just to make sure that everybody who is needy and looking forward to a half-decent Christmas... we take their names and we make sure we get something for them.”

The children who benefit may be suffering problems such as mental health issues, homelessness or missing family members. Throughout the holiday season, caseworkers from Children and Youth Services visit families in the county and will



Denise Watson wraps presents on Monday at an Allentown location for Operation Santa Claus.

provide resources such as clothing, shoes, money for rent, beds, pajamas and books.

The gift drive has provided for over 1,700 children since 2019, according to the program’s portal.

The estimated 700 children the gift drive is serving this year is a stark contrast to 2020, when the pandemic caused a roughly 40% drop to about 300 kids. Butz added the pandemic was not an issue this year for the number of kids helped or the ability of caseworkers to visit families with gifts.

To make Operation Santa Claus a success requires donors willing to step up for families in need. And every year, plenty of people do — often, those who were helped themselves as children.

Butz recalled one man who went from enduring poverty as a child to owning his own business and offered to contribute to the gift drive.

“He said, ‘I was a really poor kid ... I’m giving you a \$1,000 worth of gift certificates,’” she said. “And we said, ‘Well that’s just fantas-

tic,’ and he said, ‘I know what it’s like to be that poor, that you don’t have any gifts.’”

The program also relies on area businesses, such as HNL Lab Medicine, whose employees helped gather gifts for more than 170 people, according to marketing director Jess Bargiglione.

“We have an incredibly caring team that always gets involved the moment the opportunity becomes available and never hesitates to give generously,” she said. “The staff that dropped off the gifts were moved to tears, [awestruck] by how incredible it was to see all that Operation Santa Claus does for our community.”

How you can help: Anyone can donate to the cause by sending a check to the Fund to Benefit Children and Youth at 904 W. Highland St., Whitehall, PA 18052.

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