

The Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) keeps children in Allegheny County safe and helps to provide for their essential needs. One important need for people is having a sense of normalcy and for children especially, that can mean experiencing some of the same joys and happiness as others. But when the holidays come, children in need can feel left out.

For children involved in our county's child welfare system and through the generosity of our community, the holidays are not without presents and smiles, thanks to the DHS Holiday Project. Employees from the region's largest companies to independent mom-and-pop shops sponsor individual children, or hold gift collections, buying toys, clothing and more. Local scout groups, churches, clubs and other organizations conduct toy drives or help in other ways. Anonymous donors contribute money, or donate clothes, books, and other gifts. We are proud to say in 2013, through all of these efforts, the project benefitted 4,000 children.

The Holiday Project is a hallmark of the outreach and community engagement philosophy DHS espouses: An effort that knits together the community on many levels for the betterment of children and families, extending the reach of government far beyond what DHS alone could ever hope to achieve.



Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County
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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT



Rich Fitzgerald
Allegheny County Executive

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Holiday Project



Athena

Athena had to tell her 8-year-old not to expect much at the holidays, maybe a gift or two. In the past, Christmas had been a little brighter, but this year, after ending a relationship, Athena was homeless. A single mom of three, who also include a two-year-old and infant, Athena spent some time in a shelter before moving in with a relative. Then the relative lost her home.

"From there we've been pretty much bouncing around," Athena said, a week before Christmas, from the women's shelter she finally managed to enter.

The chances of a happy Christmas 2013 were "very slim," she said, with a knowing laugh.

Athena continued:

But Athena's caseworker in the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) knew about the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Holiday Project. Fueled by donations of time, money and gifts, the Holiday Project every year makes the holidays glitter for thousands of children receiving CYF services. The items the Project provides are ones that cannot be purchased with government funding but fill a need nonetheless.

Athena's caseworker, Susan, said she recognizes what the Holiday Project brings to everyone it touches. "It's a great opportunity not only for the community to get involved in giving back, but also for the families in need, especially Athena's family."

"They have no home, no resources to give their children a good Christmas. I know when I was talking to Athena about it, her 8-year-old overheard and she got so excited that she was going to get Christmas this year. She's way too aware of her situation."

Athena readily agreed about the value of the Holiday Project. "Oh my goodness, it made me feel a lot better. To have to tell her she might only get one or two gifts and then to get several— Oh, yes, I'm very grateful."

The Holiday Project has been in existence for nearly 50 years. It began when caseworkers decided to buy gifts for the families that they assisted and has grown into the most successful communitywide philanthropic effort hosted by DHS.

Beneficiaries are children in the Allegheny County child welfare system. Donations of money, gifts, clothing and more pour into the DHS Office of Community Relations (OCR) each year for the Holiday Project, which is overseen by the Event and Donations Team, part of OCR.

Over the years the conduits for donating have evolved as the project has grown. Donors may now shop via a wish list posted by DHS online at Amazon.com. And in recent years, more than 1,000 children have been sponsored by people filling individual wish lists. That number continues to grow as more links are made between DHS and generous donors. ■

Volunteers

Donations to the Holiday Project have included autographed sports memorabilia, handmade holiday stockings, and items from organized book and toy drives. And while those items have been instrumental in the success of the Holiday Project, donations of time have been equally important. Volunteers tell DHS repeatedly that they find the project gives as much to them as it does to those who receive gifts.

Patti Lane, Director of Volunteer and Community Services for UPMC Presbyterian/Shadyside campus, who helps organize the effort UPMC staff members engage in to fulfill wish lists for 1,000 children receiving DHS services, says employees who volunteer for the Holiday Project are so touched by it, they cannot wait for it to begin each year.

"It really is the joy of giving. It fills them with joy to be able to provide these children with presents, children who might not have anything, and we have so much. We all feel the same way. It's just so much better to give children gifts than to buy for ourselves."

Stefani Massari, Program Manager of Community Engagement at the UMPC Center for Inclusion and Engagement, fielded numerous emails from volunteers who assisted with the Holiday Project in 2013. Dressed in purple shirts emblazoned with the health care corporation's Lend a Hand initiative, 59 volunteers traveled to the DHS Human Services Building, Downtown, to help fill bags with gifts for the 2013 Holiday Project.

"My son went with me and found it to be very rewarding, helping those in need," said one employee in an email to Stefani.

"The Holiday Project truly blessed my heart," wrote another employee.

More information

To learn more about the Holiday Project, visit www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/holidayproject.aspx. Or contact the Events and Donations team at 412-350-3428 or by email, EventandDonationsteam@alleghenycounty.us.