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Hugely successful year for Volunteer Center of Sonoma County's secret Santa program



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Organizers for Sonoma County's largest Secret Santa gift drive are extra jolly this year.

The Volunteer Center of Sonoma County is distributing gifts worth \$160,000 this Christmas, surpassing last year's total by \$20,000, said Buffy Welch, the Secret Santa program's coordinator.

"This has been such a successful year thanks to all of the generous donations," Welch said. "Sonoma County is such a great place to live, but there are a lot of people who are struggling to get by. ... So many can't afford to splurge and buy that Christmas gift, so this helps them put that gift under the tree."

The Volunteer Center coordinates holiday gift-giving by connecting donors with local nonprofits. Nonprofits request gifts for people, jotting down the requests on paper hearts, which are then used to decorate more than 200 "gift trees" throughout the county. People who want to donate pick a heart, purchase the desired gift and put it under the tree. At the end of December, volunteers distribute the gifts to nonprofits that asked for them.

Nonprofits then give the gifts to low-income families, elderly people and working adults to brighten their holiday.

One of the Secret Santa gifts this Christmas went to a 101-year-old woman who requested a Safeway gift card and a warm soft blanket.

Marriane McBride, president and chief executive officer for the Council on Aging, which provides services for elderly people, including the Meals on Wheels program, said the gifts are especially meaningful for elderly people who are low-income or who may not have a social support network.

“Many people we serve are frail, isolated and some may not have family nearby, so many would not be receiving anything for the holidays,” McBride said. “Because of the generosity of the people in our community, we are able to give people a gift on Christmas — it’s pretty special.”

Nearly 140 local businesses and organizations have donated cash or gifts, enabling the Volunteer Center to fill more than 15,000 wishes this month, Welch said. The donations were just short of this season’s goal of giving gifts requested by nonprofits to 15,762 people.

The organization also partners with local radio station KZST for a marathon gift-giving drive. Most of the gifts are toys for kids and warm clothes or shoes for adults, she added.

Jason Carter, program manager for Youth Connections, which helps people who have not completed high school get their GED and provides them with career mentoring, said the Secret Santa gifts are especially welcome for young parents enrolled in the program.

“Many of our students have young children, and they are socially and economically disadvantaged,” said Carter, pointing out that most of the gifts they receive are children’s toys and books. “When we give them the gifts, it’s a really good moment wrapping up a year’s worth of hard work.”

Kellie Cronin of Santa Rosa said the gift donated to her 22-month-old grandson Dayton made his Christmas Eve.

“I wish whoever bought him these gifts could see his joy opening them up,” Cronin said in an email after he opened one of them Thursday night. “We feel so blessed that people are so kind.”