

# Volunteers brave storm to bring food and supplies to the needy

**Helping out** | Area churches and agencies find the need for aid is greater this holiday

By **CATHERINE TREVISON**  
THE OREGONIAN

Ninety holiday food boxes sat in the basement at St. Rita Catholic Church early Saturday, and Sally Shannon was nervous.

The need was bigger than Shannon had seen in 13 years as a St. Vincent de Paul volunteer, and supplies from the food bank were running low. St. Rita parishioners pulled deep from their own pockets to fill in with everything from candy canes to bright blue bags filled with potatoes. They braved a week of wintry weather to pack and organize.

But as delivery time arrived, streets around the east Portland church were emptied by a fresh slick of snow. Shannon sat at a small table in a corner, holding index cards with addresses organized by street. She didn't know what would happen.

And then volunteers came, in ones and twos and threes, with little sedans and big four-wheelers, wearing layers of sweatshirts and traction pads on their shoes. Within two hours, the last holiday boxes were flowing out the door and Shannon was beaming with relief.

**"This is Christmas"**

The wind bit Harry Guildner's face and fingers each time he lowered his tailgate in front of six tiny houses near the church. But Guildner, a retired union official from Nebraska, wasn't bothered by the weather.

"This is Christmas," he said, watching fellow volunteer Mac Dimmitt and Dimmitt's son, Kevin, approach a house that had windows swathed in plastic to keep in heat. "Not going to Wal-Mart and buying presents. This is what it's all about."

With a record number of Oregonians receiving food stamps, the number of holiday requests had been overwhelming at St. Rita and other agencies in the metro area that help needy people.

**Warming centers**

Portland warming centers are asking people to donate cold weather gear, and also are looking for people to volunteer at the shelters. **Drop off blankets, socks, coats, tarps and gloves at JOIN, 3338 S.E. 17th Ave. in Portland. Call 503-232-2031 or visit www.joinpdx.com for more information.** **For volunteering and training, contact Hands On Greater Portland at 503-200-3355 or www.handsonportland.org. Call 2-1-1 for shelter and transportation questions.**

They knew it would be a tough Christmas in the neighborhoods around St. Rita, St. Vincent de Paul volunteer Rita Lambert said. Since January, the number of families seeking weekly help from the church has tripled.

At SnowCap Community Charities in Gresham, applications for 1,050 food boxes were filled in three days in early November.

"That shocked all of us," said SnowCap Executive Director Judy Alley. "That's the first time that it's ever been like this. All the rest of this time, this holiday season, we've been saying no, which is not why any of us got into this line of work at all."

Only half of SnowCap's scheduled drivers arrived Saturday morning, "but then a whole different group of volunteers, people in big rigs, showed up to help," Alley said.

**Donations lag need**

Donations aren't keeping up. Demand for emergency food boxes is up 16 percent since last year at the Portland Police Bureau Sunshine Division, but gifts of food and clothing have fallen 11 percent, program manager Sara Gourley said. Gifts of money dropped 20 percent.

Yet Saturday, hundreds of volunteer drivers began lining up at

5 a.m. to deliver 2,000 holiday food boxes from the division's North Portland warehouse. Most came extra early or made deliveries with tire chains and four-wheel drives, she said.

"We got to a point where we had to turn (volunteers) away," Gourley said. This year, "I think people are really into giving their time."

When Cathy Tackett saw the weather forecast, she wasn't sure what would happen. But two sets of St. Rita volunteers dropped by, one for Tackett and another for a homeless friend.

The church has helped Tackett and her two daughters many times over the years, but the holiday box — with everything necessary for a festive dinner plus basics such as tuna fish and peanut butter — is special, she said.

"Like the turkey, you know? It's just a step beyond," she said. "It's big enough for the family, something you sit down and eat together."

For her friend, who has been surviving on simple food like sandwiches, the box makes the holiday, she said.


"And with the weather like it is, this ... could last a week of us not having to worry about going to the store," she said.

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