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Kids getting warm coats just in time for winter

BY EMELINE RODENAS

For infortwayne.com

With November comes snowy weather and a winter coat during the cold season is a must if you live in northeast Indiana.

Local organizations have kicked off coat drives. The Volunteer Center is accepting coats and donations for Coats for Kids, while distributing coats to Fort Wayne schools. Wellspring Interfaith Social Services is accepting new and gently used winter coats and accessories.

Fort Wayne Mayor Tom Henry was on hand Thursday at MLK Montessori School, 6001 S. Anthony Blvd., to kick off the 21st annual Coats for Kids campaign. A few students stepped outside the school on that unusually mild November day to select their own coats.

To date, over 66,000 coats have been delivered to more than 125 area schools and social service agencies.

The campaign is accepting donations of new or gently used winter coats, children's Size 7 and above, through adult

SEE COATS, PAGE A16



WELLSPRING INTERFAITH SOCIAL SERVICES

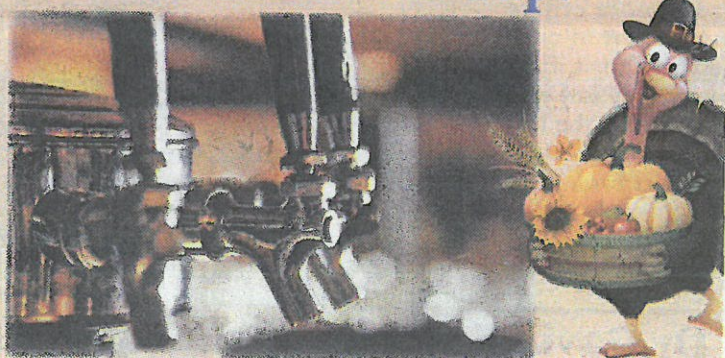
Local organizations are starting their coat drives now that cold weather is here. Wellspring Interfaith Social Services and the Volunteer Center in Fort Wayne are just two groups now accepting donations of winter coats.



GARTH SNOW

Mayor Tom Henry said Coats for Kids is an example of Fort Wayne's efforts on behalf of those in need. Henry spoke Thursday at a Coats for Kids distribution at MLK Montessori School.

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COATS

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sizes. Donate coats at Peerless Cleaners, YMCA locations, Parkview Ortho Hospital, Sweetwater, Dollar General stores in Adms, Allen, Huntington, Wells and Whitley counties, Darlington Holiday Warehouse and the GM Union Hall. Collections will continue through Sunday, Nov. 29.

In a news release, Volunteer Center Executive Director Ani Etter said, "COVID-19 has brought new economic challenges to many families in our community, with 26% of children age 18 and under living in poverty in Allen County. We live in a generous and giving community that has always supported this initiative to assist us in helping children in need."

Fort Wayne Firefighters, Volunteer Center community volunteers and YMCA team members will deliver the coats to schools and social service agencies during the first week of Dec. 17.

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In remarks Thursday, Etter said the year 2020 finds us wearing face masks and socially distancing. "So everything is a little topsy turvy. It's a little different," she said. "And in addition to that COVID-19 obviously has had a great effect on our economy. We already knew that over 25% of children in Fort Wayne and our surrounding area are either in the federal poverty level or slightly above."

"So these are families that are working, they are trying to make ends meet, they are doing the best they can to provide for their families and their children," she said.

She said employees have had their hours decreased and the restau-

rant and travel industries have been hard hit. "Now more than ever Fort Wayne we need your help," she said. "We want to make sure we are able to help these kiddos stay warm this winter."

She said the greatest need is for boys and girls coats sizes 6-18. The program needs warm coats, not just hoodies or vests, to protect children in Indiana winters, she said.

"\$25 will provide a new winter coat, hat, gloves and scarf for a child in need," she said. "So if that is easier for you in this era of COVID-19 you can do that directly on our website. We have a great supplier of coats so we can get that at a very low cost and actually maximize our buying power."

Mayor Henry said to be able to provide coats to the young people of the city 21 years in a row speaks volumes about Fort Wayne.

He said Fort Wayne has just been named the Indiana Community of the Year by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. "This is a very prestigious award, something we've been working on for about 10 years and we finally got it," he said. "One of the reasons that Fort Wayne received that award is because we realized that a community is only as good as those who take care of our citizens in need. Our young people, many of them, are in need of warm clothing in the winter. We recognized that some years ago, and we took that on as a challenge and look what it's produced. Not only almost 70,000 coats to young people but more than that it made a statement about Fort Wayne, that we do care about those in need. To me it's no wonder that we got that award because

Fort Wayne is that kind of community. We are a very special city and once again we've proven that we care for our own."

Robert Grashoff, Volunteer Center board chair, said the coat drive is "probably more important than any year in the past."

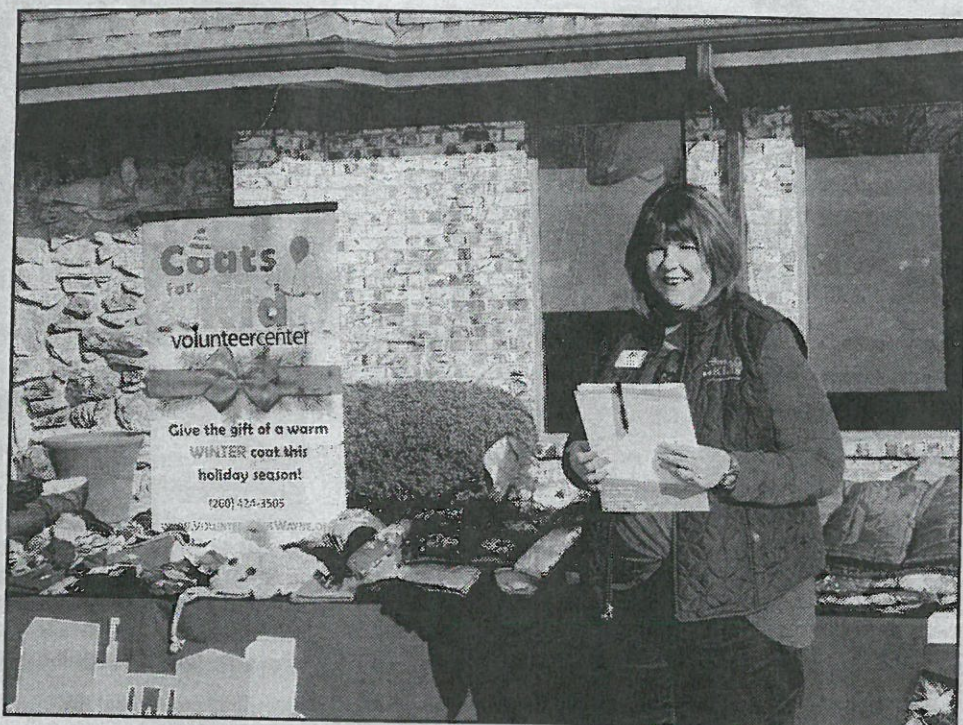
"We're asking the community to dig deep in their closets and bring out what they can," he said. "And at Peerless Cleaners one of our roles for the past 21 years has been to inspect and clean every coat to make sure that every kid in gets a very clean and sanitized coat. And I assure you we will do that."

Fire Chief Eric Lahey spoke on behalf of the Fort Wayne Fire Department, whose members assist in distributing the coats. He said the coat drive brings assurance "that in the midst of all the uncertainties that this year has brought us that some things don't change."

"And thanks to the Volunteer Center and all their partners in the Coats for Kids program we're able once again to deliver coats to those kids in our community who need them as winter is approaching," Lahey continued. "And on behalf of the men and women of the Fort Wayne Fire Department I just want to say how proud I am that the Fort Wayne Fire Department is able to partner with the Volunteer Center in this great initiative of providing those coats to our children. So we will continue to do that, deliver those coats, and get them there as safely as we can in this pandemic."

Wellspring

Coats donated to Wellspring Interfaith Social Services can be dropped off at their location at 1316 Broadway, Monday through Friday. Exact



GARTH SNOW

Volunteer Center Executive Director Ani Etter explains the goals of the Coats for Kids program. Etter spoke Thursday at MLK Montessori School.

hours are on the organization's website.

Wellspring, a nonprofit, serves the community through Wellspring Shoppe. The organization asks people to consider donating new and gently used winter coats and accessories, especially in larger sizes, according to Wellspring's Facebook page. Executive Director Melissa Rinehart said winter apparel is just a small part of Wellspring's work.

The shop is open to people in need, offering everything from shorts to blouses and suits. "People have to call and make an appointment. It's all based

on family size. We set it up like a boutique; clients really like that. We have an entire building that's dedicated to suiting people up," Rinehart said.

"We operate on donated clothing. It sits for a few days; then volunteers inspect it. We have some very large families that need clothes," Rinehart said.

Rinehart said Wellspring accepts all size coats, but is always in need of men's and women's larger size coats, ideally 2X and 3X sizes. Clothing should be gently used, without holes or stains. Any items that don't pass inspection are

taken to the Salvation Army, so those items can still be reused, Rinehart said.

According to Rinehart, totals for 2020 have been low due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the shop for a few months, but the organization served 1,618 households and 5,361 individuals in 2019, distributing an estimated 36,614 items to people in need.

More information about the coat drives is available at volunteer-fortwayne.org and wellspringinterfaith.org.

Garth Snow of IN Fort Wayne Newspapers contributed to this report.

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