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Backpack project for needy kids starts its 16th year

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By: Nancy Pasternack

CAPITOLA — Last year it was the \$1,000 check from an anonymous donor, and the 25 backpacks collected by workers in the obstetrics unit at Watsonville Hospital.

Karen Lemon, who organizes the Write Start Backpack Project for homeless and low-income students, says that each year people support the program in surprising ways.

The Watsonville Hospital workers "had their own little campaign going," Lemon says. Each backpack was filled with supplies.

For the 16th year, the Santa Cruz County Office of Education's Students in Transition Program is conducting the back-to-school drive for such items as backpacks (no royal blue or red ones, please), supplies such as notebooks, pencils, crayons, and calculators, Metro bus passes and gift certificates.

Lemon says that Write Start collected nearly 900 supply-filled backpacks last year — more than any other year. Costco donated 600 and community groups and citizens donated the rest.

Of the 38,000 students in Santa Cruz County schools, more than 3,000 students qualify for homeless assistance and more than 16,000 qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The Walnut Avenue Women's Center, a recipient of Lemon's program, is also seeking new shoes.

During the center's 2004 holiday drive, food and gifts were collected for 400 children in 150 families, according to Meg George, family support coordinator for WAWC.

"To get a new pair of shoes would mean the world to some of these kids," says George.

For instance, she says, there's a child in the family programs whose mom just gave birth to a new baby.

"So much of the family's resources are going to the new child now," George says, "that this preschooler has outgrown all his clothes and has duct-taped shoes."

Lemon says her program helped a father of three who lost his job last year get through the difficult months of caring for his wife and children through his unemployment. He repeatedly called to express his gratitude. And when he got hired again, he volunteered to help Lemon run this year's program.

"When you work with needy families there's always something that touches you."

Contact Nancy Pasternack at npasternack@santacruzsentinel.com.