



Community centers note increase in demand for donated school supplies

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Posted: Aug. 24, 2008

The Bay View Community Center is well-established as a food pantry and family resource center on the south side of Milwaukee, but these days, the center is fielding multiple calls each day from people desperately looking for an additional resource: school supplies.

In Waukesha and Milwaukee counties especially, social service agencies have been scrambling to meet the needs of more families this August who, beleaguered by higher food and gasoline prices, need help with all the costs associated with sending a child back to school.

A school supplies giveaway at the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center in Milwaukee last week prompted hundreds of families to line up outside the center almost an hour before the event started. The agency gave out more than 560 bags of supplies.

The annual Waukesha County Backpack Coalition, spearheaded by the county's Salvation Army, bought and filled 200 more backpacks this year with school supplies for the nearly 2,000 students whose families couldn't afford the investment.

"It seems like a lot of people were sort of able to adjust to higher gas prices and higher food prices over the summer, but now that they have to pay all

this money for school supplies, it's put some people over the edge," said Rachel Fjellman, social services director at the Salvation Army in Waukesha County.

Fjellman and other organizers at churches and social service agencies say backpacks and calculators have been particularly hard to obtain through donations because the items are more expensive.

Waukesha resident and single mother Gloria Bolling knows that fact from a different perspective — her daughter is about to enter high school, when certain high-functioning calculators are needed and where supply lists can include other expensive items.

"It's a real crunch for us this year," said Bolling, who is unemployed but searching for a job as a certified nursing assistant. "She has to have five or six binders, pens, pencils, graphic arts material, the backpack — that's all at least \$50 or \$60."

This past week, Bolling's daughter picked out a leftover backpack filled with supplies from the Salvation Army's Backpack Coalition drive.

Bolling said higher costs for rent, utilities and food have made everything more difficult this year. Her daughter might have a new backpack, but Bolling can't afford to buy her any new clothes or new shoes.

Across the country, back-to-school spending traditionally rakes in big-industry bucks.

The National Retail Federation expects spending on supplies, clothes, shoes and electronics for K-12 students to hit \$20.1 billion this year, compared with more than \$18.4 billion spent in 2007.

Last year, the average family spent \$94 on school supplies alone at the start of school, the Federation's figures show. And when you combine all those

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back-to-school purchases — clothes, shoes, accessories, supplies — an average family can expect to spend about \$600, another Federation survey showed.

For low-income families, the situation can be vastly different.

Their needs, whether for school supplies or food or rent money, are interconnected, explained Linda Nieft, president and CEO of the Bay View Community Center. Many parents are hitting the food pantry more often because it frees up their dollars to spend on rent or utilities or other unforeseen expenses for their children.

“We’re seeing families needing to come into our food pantry more often — it’s at least a 10% increase,” Nieft said. “August and September we always see a bit of an increase in traffic because of school starting, but this year we’re seeing a whole lot more people.”

Nieft said that for the first time in 25 years she’s extremely worried about how long and how well the agency can support her clients’ additional needs, especially when donations are down from their most reliable donors, who are understandably reining back their own expenses.

“I’m scared about this year,” Nieft said. “Since July 1, I’ve spent almost \$1,800 buying additional food just to keep our necessities stocked, and that’s way beyond our budget.”

At St. Benedict the Moor Parish, which held its own annual school supply giveaway on Saturday, the dinner program for the homeless has seen a similar spike in clients over the past month, said Dave Schwab, the director of meals.

The Milwaukee parish had planned, as usual, to give away school supplies to at least 200 children

Saturday afternoon, but Schwab said he received many calls prior to the event from people making sure they didn’t miss it.

You can tell times are rough, he added, when a family has to make a choice between clothing or school supplies.

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