

Christmas Appeal

Funds help to bridge gap in services

What is the Christmas Appeal?

It is a cooperative effort of the *Catholic Courier* and diocesan Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Rochester to raise funds for people in desperate financial crisis.

For the past 28 years, the appeal has enabled the Catholic community to help thousands of people in 12 counties to help meet life's basic needs. Christmas Appeal funds have been there for them when no other sources of aid were available.

Who benefits from it?

The Christmas Appeal helps individuals and families in short-term financial crises. These are people who have no financial resources and are either awaiting or are ineligible for assistance through other sources.

How does it work?

Appeal proceeds are allocated to the emergency funds of the following diocesan agencies: Catholic Family Center; Finger Lakes Social Ministry; Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier; Catholic Charities of Livingston County outreach; Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation; and diocesan Urban Services.

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By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Sister Nancy O'Brien, RSM, received a noontime telephone call from the *Catholic Courier* Dec. 10.

In response to a general question about how she was, she blurted, "Busy!"

Sister O'Brien, who coordinates Catholic Charities of Livingston County Rural Outreach, explained that she had already received an unusual number of calls that day from people anxiously seeking assistance.

One call, for example, came from a couple who live in a rural part of Livingston County. The husband has muscular dystrophy. The wife had recently had a hysterectomy and was incapable of heavy manual work.

"They had a delivery of wood, which they heat by, but nobody to split it for them," Sister O'Brien reported.

While trying to find them the needed help, she said, "I received two or three calls from families that are desperate to have Christmas for their children."

One of those calls came from a woman who is legally blind, and had had to leave her abusive husband.

"She will hopefully get Social Security at some time, but it's a long process," Sister O'Brien lamented.

Then she received a call from a woman who had lost telephone service due to unpaid bills. The woman had quit her job because her son had recently been diagnosed with a debilitating illness and she needed to be available to help with him.



Linda Rivers

But her husband's salary was not enough to support them. They will eventually receive SSI for the son, Sister O'Brien explained, but it had not started yet.

Each year there are many such calls for help, Sister O'Brien acknowledged — and the number is increasing. She noted that in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 1996, she provided help for 330 families. That number grew to 480 in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 1997.

"I think so many of the statistics you look at are wrong," Sister O'Brien said. "They say unemployment is so low, but they don't tell you how many people work at minimum wage, and you can't support a family on minimum wage. Some of them are working two jobs."

"Here, if you don't have a car, you can't get to Rochester where there are better paying jobs," she added.

Meanwhile, in her rural county, people have to contend with isolation and a

limited number of support agencies.

One way Sister O'Brien is able to help these people is through funds provided by the *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal. Those funds allow her to aid people who have no other immediate sources of assistance.

Thus, for example, she planned to use appeal funds to help the family with the ill child pay their phone bill.

It is precisely to address such needs that the Christmas Appeal was created in 1969 as a combined effort of diocesan Catholic Charities and the *Courier*. The appeal provides a pool of money that can be used to help people in emergency situations who can't find help elsewhere, or who can't wait for that help to begin. Over the years, workers at Catholic Charities, the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation and diocesan Urban Services have tapped into the fund year-round to help cover everything from utility bills to car repairs.

Sister O'Brien said she mostly uses appeal funds for prescriptions, rent and gas, "so people can get to a new job so they can get their first paycheck."

She noted that she was fortunate to have a good working relationship with the county Department of Social Services, and that the towns in Livingston County have a good network of food pantries. But sometimes, more is needed.

"If a situation comes to me I try to refer (the people) to somewhere else," she said. "But where nothing else is available, I use Christmas Appeal money."

Neediest Cases

Monies collected during the *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal aid people throughout the year, but especially at Christmas. The following are some of the individuals and families who have been helped in the past with Christmas Appeal funds.

★ A wheelchair-bound woman had to be carried in and out of her home twice a day to use the outhouse. Appeal funds were used to help install a bathroom in the home.

★ A rural family of five was living in an old mobile home. There were no steps to enter the home; heat was provided by a wood stove; the bathroom and floors were unsafe; the electrical system was dangerous; and the water and septic systems needed repair. The owners had no furniture. The two young sons slept on the floor and the daughter slept on a small cot. Appeal funds were used to help replace the mobile home.

★ An elderly couple was living on Social Security when the husband was hos-

pitalized. Medical bills had eaten up what money they had, and then the Social security check was late, leaving the wife at home with no money and no food. They were given money to help buy food and cover some of the medical bills.

★ A low-income mother of five did not have enough money to pay the application fee for summer camp for two of her children. She was given \$20 for the application fee.

★ A grandmother raising her five grandchildren fell behind in her mortgage payment after her DSS benefits were cut, and faced foreclosure. She received \$100 to help with her mortgage bill.

★ A couple, their son and their mother moved to Rochester from New York City. The husband eventually found a job, but not before the family had used up what money they had. Appeal funds helped them to buy some food and clothes while they waited for his paychecks to begin.

★ A 34-year-old recovering addict with four children was forced to move after her landlord refused to fix housing-code violations. She found herself short of

money, so her family had no food. She was given \$25 to buy food for herself and her children.

★ A 19-year-old girl whose mother is deceased and whose father was deported applied for public assistance. But while waiting for approval, she was without money to buy food. She received \$25 to purchase food.

★ A 16-year-old girl who is alcoholic and a drug addict was arrested by police for theft. Christmas Appeal funds were used to help with transportation to a drug/alcohol rehabilitation clinic.

★ A 23-year-old single mother with two young daughters was working full-time, but could not keep up with her family's needs. She was given Christmas Appeal funds to help buy winter clothing and shoes.

★ A couple with five foster children living in a rural area in the Southern Tier needed to make frequent doctor's visits, sometimes to Rochester. Their car needed repairs, but no other agencies would help pay for them. The family received \$43 to buy a needed part for the car.

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