

Community Christmas campaign collects more than 19,000 items

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EAST ALTON — The twenty-sixth annual **United Way Community Christmas** donation drive for the Riverbend community once again brought in thousands of items for those in need during the holiday season. This year, Community Christmas collected **19,252 items**, including non-perishable food, clothes, winter weather necessities like gloves, hats and scarves, blankets, towels, baby care items, hygiene items, and new toys.

The drive wrapped up on Thursday, Dec. 10, when more than 100 boxes were picked up from local businesses and dropped off at Main Street United Methodist Church in Alton

for sorting. On Friday, Dec. 11, the 17 local recipient agencies picked up their items to distribute through their holiday programs.

“It was so inspiring to see the overflowing boxes filled with toys and gifts coming in on Thursday and knowing that once again this community came through for those in need,” said Megan Allen, Phillips 66 community affairs coordinator, and 2015 Community Christmas chair. “Whether it was the Freer Auto Body Cookies and Cocoa for Christmas, the Grandpa Gang at Christmas Wonderland, the dozens of businesses who hosted a box, or the individuals who gave so generously to help others, everyone’s contribution made a huge difference in the lives of thousands this holiday season.”

The 17 agencies that picked up their items on Friday, December 11, included: Boys & Girls Club of Alton, Caritas Family Solutions (Christian Social Services), Catholic Charities of Madison County, Catholic Children’s Home, Centerstone (WellSpring Resources), Charity Works, Children’s Home and Aid, Crisis Food Center, Inc., Illinois Center for Autism, Lutheran Child and Family Services, Oasis Women’s Center, Operation Blessing, Riverbend Community Food Pantry, Riverbend Family Ministries, Riverbend Head Start & Family Services, Salvation Army and Village of Royal Lakes (Concerned Citizens).

“This year was absolutely amazing,” said Dawna Gilbreath, United Way’s Community Christmas coordinator. “I am really excited because we will be able to help more families this year thanks to the generosity of people like the Freer family and hundreds of other companies and individuals who participated in this year’s program. The support of the community seems to be increasing every year, and this speaks volumes about the genuine care they have for helping people. I want to thank everyone who supported our program, allowing our agencies to continue helping more than 6,000 people in the Riverbend through Community Christmas.”

Dozens of volunteers participated on Thursday and Friday to help pick up the boxes from businesses, unload the many truck-full loads of donations, and sort and count the items for distribution to the agencies. Students from Alton High School Student Council, Mary Jo Kratschmer and several friends, Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 553, Mike Dale and Megan Allen were a major part of the volunteer efforts throughout the sorting and loading on Thursday and Friday.

Several companies received awards for their outstanding participation in the program this year. They are as follows:

Outstanding Overall Supporters

Freer Auto Body – 2015 Outstanding Community Christmas Supporter in fundraising, volunteerism and special events

The entire Freer family, with a special shout-out to Taylor and Lily, are essential supporters of the program. The Freer family collected a grand total of \$27,191 from Christmas in July and Cookies and Cocoa for Christmas, along with hundreds of toys, coats and other items. The Freer Family goes above and beyond to bring Christmas to the community each year.

Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 553 – 2015 Outstanding Community Christmas Supporter in volunteerism and fundraising

Local 553 and Mike Toner were once again a critical asset to the program, collecting 580 items and donating \$1,000 to the program.

River Bend Chiropractic Center – 2015 Outstanding Community Christmas Supporter in fundraising

Dr. Stephanie Monroe and her team go above and beyond for the program year after year, creating their own flyers for both a food drive and toy drive to encourage clients and staff to participate in the program. This year, they collected 463 items.

Top Company/Organization Donations

Alton High School – 3,800 items collected

Phillips 66 Wood River Refinery – 1,100 items collected

Heintz Orthodontics – 300 items collected

Shell Credit Union – 250 items collected

CNB Bank & Trust – 94 items collected