

This year, Christmas toy drives have been coming up short

Santa needs more help

DEC-2007



Tribune photo by Scott Strazzante

South Suburban Toys for Kids organizer LoQuator Dinkins (with grandson Keeshawn Smith, 1) checks on the status of toy donation barrels Friday. Toy donations are down this year across the country.

By Joel Hood
Tribune staff reporter

After more than three decades of helping families in need, LoQuator Dinkins knows a thing or two about hard times. But this holiday season, she need look no further than the few dozen empty barrels stacked high inside her backroom warehouse.

"Look right here," Dinkins said, pointing out the pyramid of blue containers. "That's where the toys are supposed to be. A lot of people need these toys, and I don't know what to tell them."

The South Suburban Toys for Kids charity has collected

Local toy drives

Most drives have wrapped up for the season, but these two are still accepting donations:

**U.S. Marine Corps Reserve
Toys for Tots Program**
3034 W. Foster Ave.
Chicago
www.chicagotoysfortots.org
for more locations

**South Suburban Toys
for Kids**
16710 S. Richmond Ave.
Hazel Crest
www.lbdenterprises.org
708-596-7168

about 20,000 toys so far this season, according to the charity's board president, Jeffrey Cantor. The gifts include dolls, skateboards and stuffed animals of every color and shape. But they number fewer than

half of the 50,000 the charity received a year ago to distribute to thousands of needy families and dozens of churches, day-care centers and relief agencies.

After five years of steady

growth for toy drives across Chicago and around the country, donations have fallen far short of expectations this season. That has forced large organizations such as the Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program in Chicago to extend its collection drive into the weekend and smaller drives such as Dinkins' to simply turn many away.

"It's frustrating—I'm frustrated," said Sgt. Maj. Anthony Carter, who is helping run the Toys for Tots drive in Chicago. "I grew up in a middle-class family, and I can't imagine what it would have been like

PLEASE SEE TOYS, PAGE 2

TOYS: Marines have 1.5 million fewer gifts

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

waking up on Christmas morning and not having a toy. But there are going to be lots of children who will this Christmas."

The Marines' drive had received 250,000 toys through Friday, Carter said, down about 30 percent from more than 366,000 a year ago.

Nationally, the Virginia-based Marine Toys for Tots Foundation, which launched its first holiday toy drive in 1947, has seen donations drop to 6 million this season, compared with more than 7.5 million toys in 2006, said Maj. Bill Grein, a foundation vice president.

Charity organizers admit they're puzzled by the sudden drop-off after several stellar years in a row. But they're willing to speculate on reasons: a sagging economy, higher gas prices, a struggling housing



Tribune photo by Scott Strazzante

Henry Dinkins (left) and Willie Pryor of South Suburban Toys for Kids exchange an empty barrel for a full one Friday at Homewood Village Hall.

market and more competition for charitable donations.

Organizers also suspect the

publicity over lead paint concerns that prompted massive toy recalls earlier this year and

a general heightened anxiety about unsafe toys have contributed to the decline. Perhaps

up this year at Toys for Tots. Organizers are using some of that extra money to buy more toys, Carter said.

"The hysteria over toy recalls didn't help us a bit," Grein said. "You could probably point to a lot of things. But that certainly has to be considered."

Dinkins, whose non-profit LBD Enterprises Inc. began with a food pantry in Hazel Crest 20 years ago, added the toy drive in 1994 to target families she said were often overlooked by larger charities based in Chicago. She now distributes toys to 15 churches and about 30 day-care centers in Harvey, Robbins, Markham, Chicago Heights and other places where wages are typically low and even working families often struggle to make ends meet, Dinkins said.

LBD Enterprises has had its own struggles to overcome. This summer, the charity fell behind \$3,500 on its electric bill and had the power shut off. But Dinkins persevered and continued to serve food out of the darkened warehouse off 167th Street. After her story appeared in the Tribune in June, countless people donated food and money to turn the lights back on.

"If this place couldn't do the work they do, there'd be an aw-

vey resident Ernest Smith, whose nine grandchildren have received toys through the program.

Retailers typically are the largest contributors to toy drives, but individual families play a crucial part, Carter said. Dinkins said she spent part of this week at local department stores trying to spark an interest in giving. But as the days count down toward Christmas, wallets already are being stretched, she said.

Sunday is South Suburban Toys for Kids' annual giveaway at Markham Field House. Dinkins and up to 100 volunteers will give out toys to needy families who've registered by showing they qualify for or receive government assistance.

Dinkins expects to deliver a portion of the toys then, plus some clothes and jackets that have been donated. Volunteers will deliver the rest at different locations up until Christmas. But she's been reaching out to some churches and day-care centers and telling them to not expect toys as in years past.

"A lot of them are upset, and I don't blame them," Dinkins said. "But what else am I going to do?"

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