

Toys for Tots comes out ahead

■ County demand met, and then some

By **JEFF NEWMAN**

Staff writer

A few weeks ago, Petty Officer 1st Class Jerry Kepich of Chesapeake Beach was concerned that Calvert's Toys for Tots program, which he oversees, might not collect enough toys in time to supply all registered families by Christmas.

But Santa came a little early for Kepich - donations picked up so much over the last couple weeks that by the time the program met its county quota, it tallied a rough surplus of 2,000 toys.

In all, a little over 5,000 toys were collected via collection boxes placed throughout the county and various toy drives and community efforts, Kepich said. It was the first year the county had its own Toys for Tots program, which made it difficult to gauge both demand and supply.

"It was kind of hard to judge where we needed to be, but we definitely did exceed our expectations," Kepich said.

The 43 county families that registered with the program were originally scheduled to receive toys at the American Legion Stalling-Williams Post 206 in Chesapeake Beach on Saturday, Dec. 19, but Mother Nature didn't oblige. The nearly two feet of snow covering Calvert that weekend forced Kepich to postpone distribution a few days.

"The big concern was the safety

of the public," he said.

Kepich also took into consideration that most of the families lived in either the Twin Beaches or Lusby areas and decided to split distribution between the Chesapeake Beach legion on Dec. 21 and American Legion Post 274 in Lusby on Dec. 22.

The toys were spread out at both posts and Kepich assigned each family a number based on when they registered - those who signed up first got first dibs at selecting toys, two for each child. Only one family did not show up, and with so many extra toys, the Calvert County Department of Social Services was able to add a few families that didn't register in time, Kepich said.

Both legions donated the use of their halls for distribution and Kepich credited the county's public libraries and Calvert County Sheriff's Office with helping to promote the campaign. The sheriff's office ran a series of radio announcements over local stations and Comcast played television advertisements, he added.

"I think when you have [the support of] county agencies like the sheriff's department and the public libraries and the American Legions, it definitely helps," Kepich said.

Once the families got their toys, hundreds were sent to county organizations, including Catholic Charities, Children's Aid, the Southern Maryland Community Network, SMILE Ecumenical Ministries and Safe Harbor, Kepich said. The program also gave one

toy to each child who participated in the county's Shop with a Cop event.

After exhausting its in-county demand, the remaining 2,000 toys were sent to The Greater Waldorf Jaycees, a community service organization based in Waldorf. Normally, the Jaycees hold fundraisers to buy toys for the children it helps, but this winter it ran out of money and needed toys donated for 600 additional kids, Kepich said.

"Having excess is a good thing," he added.

In addition to the legion halls, the program also received a donated U-Haul truck and gas from the Dunkirk BP gas station and storage units from Friendly Self Storage and Sam Store and Move. In fact, the program didn't spend a single dollar on anything other than toys, Kepich said.

Community support didn't stop there - Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, Young Marines units and all four of the county's NJROTC programs helped collect toys. Seven members of Northern High School's National Honors Society also helped with last week's distribution, Kepich said.

"I think it's important to have the youth involved, and that definitely happened," he added.

With all the toys gone, Kepich's focus is on finishing reports that must be filed with the national Toys for Tots campaign, which gave Calvert's program \$2,700 and \$1,000 for shopping sprees at Toys "R" Us and Big Lots, respectively.

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