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Nonprofits pleasantly surprised by donations in tough economy

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Nonprofit groups that serve needy people in the Sacramento area got an unexpected dose of good cheer this holiday season.

Braced for lean times in a woeful economy, many are reporting holiday campaigns that matched or even exceeded donations of previous years.

"Maybe the hard times bring out the best in people," said Alice Gentry, community affairs manager for River Oak Center for Children, which provides mental health and social services to youngsters from birth through age 18.

"Sacramento is a very giving community. People who have jobs and are doing OK seem to be saying, 'Let me share.'"

The agency has raised about \$15,000 in December alone to help its 800 clients with everything from paying utility bills to blankets and clothing, she said. "It's still coming in. We're getting gifts of \$10 all the way up to \$1,000."

Given reports of layoffs, foreclosures and business failures nationwide, River Oak and other organizations had low expectations for their winter fund drives.

"We were holding our breath this year, and we were very, very pleasantly pleased," Gentry said.

Holiday fundraisers can make or break a year for charities, which in 2008 saw demand for their services rise as the economy softened.

Loaves & Fishes, which feeds, clothes and provides services to hundreds of homeless men, women and children, has seen a 15 percent increase in clients who never have used its services before, said executive director Sister Libby Fernandez.

"We were worried," said advocacy director Joan Burke. But businesses and individuals have come to the agency's rescue.

"People were even more generous this year than in the past," Burke said. Warm coats, sleeping bags, hats, gloves and socks have appeared "in abundance," she said, supplying more than enough gifts to distribute to everyone in need.

The agency has raised about \$500,000 in cash contributions this month, about even with last year,

officials said.

"It was very affirming," said Burke. "It truly was a surprise, because people are very stretched right now. There seems to be a sense that times are getting tougher, and we've all got to pull together."

When the Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services launched a daylong Thanksgiving turkey drive, it got donations of 5,000 birds, far more than anticipated, said director Blake Young. The food bank is seeing about 20 percent more clients this year than last year, he said.

Steve Heath, president and chief executive officer of United Way California Capital Region, wrote in his online newsletter earlier this month that despite reports of "economic gloom and doom," money pledges were flowing into the agency's workplace giving campaign.

Last year, as the economic crisis began to take a toll on the region, the agency had a 9 percent increase in gifts from employers and employees in Sacramento, Amador, El Dorado, Placer and Yolo counties, he noted. "We're watching results cautiously and managing expenses very carefully, but it appears the trend will hold," Heath wrote.

"When times are tough, people really step up."

Some nonprofits are feeling the pinch of the rickety economy more than others.

Steven Burns, outreach director for Diogenes Youth Services in Sacramento, said donations to that agency are down "50 percent to 60 percent" this year.

Diogenes asked for holiday donations of McDonald's and Burger King food vouchers, telephone calling cards and coats, Burns said. "We just didn't get what we were hoping for," he said, "but we understand that it's hard times for everyone right now."

Burns and other administrators already are looking toward the new year and hoping for better times ahead, despite sobering forecasts.

"I'm very grateful for the generosity this year," Fernandez said, "but my fear is that it's going to be a very dry 2009."

Call The Bee's Cynthia Hubert, (916) 321-1082.

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