

Operation Warm Detroit collects donations

Jody McVeigh Editor
October 27, 2016



Fall is here. Leaves are turning and soon will drop to the ground. Temperatures are steadily dropping too, and it won't be long before the winter chill sets in and snow blankets the area. Heat will be cranked up and logs added to the fireplace. Clothing will be layered and coats securely buttoned or zipped before leaving the house.

Bundling up before heading outside is a luxury some may take for granted. Ask any counselor at the **Northeast Guidance Center** or Matrix Human Services and they'll tell you hundreds of students are without that warmth throughout the season.

Those are just two of the agencies helped by Operation Warm Detroit each year. Sponsored by the Grosse Pointe Rotary, Grosse Pointe Sunrise Rotary, Detroit Rotary and Detroit AM Rotary, Operation Warm Detroit collects donations to purchase coats for children who otherwise wouldn't have them. In five years, Operation Warm Detroit has raised \$290,000, used to purchase 18,300 coats, said Rotarian Paul Rentenbach, who spearheaded this year's drive.

"This year we're scheduled to donate 3,200 coats," he said. "We'll continue to collect through mid-December. If we receive more money than we need for the second order, we'll have a third order." The first order for 1,200 coats already was submitted, Rotarian Diane Strickler said. "The need is still there," Strickler said. "It's an amazing thing how many coats we distribute to Grosse Pointe and Harper Woods — through the National School Lunch Program."

More than 200 students in the program are scheduled to get coats this year, along with youngsters involved with the Children's Center of Detroit, Crossroads of Michigan, For the Seventh Generation, Matrix Human Services, **Northeast Guidance Center**, Detroit International Academy for Young Women and Southwest Solutions. Matrix alone will receive 900 coats.

"We fundraise and then connect with the agencies," Strickler said. "They know the families, know where the coats need to go. Then we place an order with Operation Warm and they ship the coats to us." The Stroh building in Detroit has leased warehouse space — for \$1 a year — to Operation Warm Detroit so the coats can be sorted before delivery. "It's a huge room there where the coats come in," Strickler said. "Rotary volunteers separate them into different piles and very often we deliver them."

Strickler said usually agency staff hand out the coats, but **Northeast Guidance Center** invites Rotarians to come.

"It's a neat experience," Strickler said. "You get to see the joy on their faces, the grateful parents. They're happy, quiet, stunned. It's a very heartwarming experience." Added Rentenbach, "The kids are just so excited about getting a new coat. Some of them will go back to the lobby to wait for their appointment and they'll still have their coats on. They don't want to take them off."

Strickler said Rotary adopted the program because it ties in with the organization's literacy campaign. "There've been incredible stories we've heard from teachers," she said, "of children not coming to school or coming every third day. One coat, three sibs, sharing a coat every third day. I can't imagine how you would keep up your education going to school every third day." This helps with literacy, but also with self-esteem," she continued. "It's been a wonderful program. It's a lot of work, a lot of man hours. Paul's carried it this year."

The Detroit project is the largest in the country, in terms of the quantity purchased and donated, Rentenbach said. Coats are available in all sizes, preschool to high school.

One coat costs \$20, but donors aren't limited to just buy one. Flyers are available throughout the Pointes at various retailers. Donations also may be made online at operationwarm-detroit.org and grossepointerotary.org.

"We'll continue to collect money and place orders as long as we have funds," Strickler said.