

Clothing Bank asks residents for donations

12/31/21

Seeks warm coats, hats, gloves, personal care items

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — BHcare clothing coordinator Joan McFarlane-Nwagboli has been known to take the coat off her back and give it to someone who needs it. Literally.

"I've seen her do it," said

longtime volunteer Maggie Gouin on a recent afternoon at the Clothing Bank, which adjoins the Community Dining Room at the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Building, 30 Harrison Ave.

But that spirit of generosity couldn't help a man who

appeared in early December. "He told me he was working construction under a bridge in the freezing cold and desperately needed an extra-large winter coat," Gouin recalled, as Christmas carols filtered through the brightly lit

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From left, Clothing Bank volunteers Maggie Gouin, Anita Ruggiero, Angelica Salg, and clothing coordinator Joan McFarlane-Nwagboli.

DONATE

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space.

That Gouin was only able to scare up two sweatshirts for the construction worker is symptomatic of a severe shortage of extra-large winter coats, as well as hats, gloves, and warm socks of all sizes, according to McFarlane-Nwagboli.

The Clothing Bank is also in dire need of pants, shirts and sweaters for girls ages 6 to 16, as well as socks, underwear (new), and personal care items such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, soap, body wash, razors, and shaving cream.

"We're asking Shoreline residents to donate whatever they can," McFarlane-Nwagboli said.

The Clothing Bank serves roughly 3,000 people throughout the state. Paying \$20 a year, shoppers can come in once a month and get up to 14 pieces of assorted clothing, shoes, boots, bedding and dishes for themselves and their children under 18. They're also eligible for coats and jackets every six months.

"We have a lot of people who are sleeping on the Green or on the grounds of one of the churches or in the woods on bone-chilling nights," McFarlane-Nwagboli said.

"But we also have people like [the construction worker] who are just trying to get by and feed their families, and for whatever reason hit a rough patch, and need a little help," she said.

Gouin agreed. "A lot of the people who come in here were recently laid off, or they're seniors struggling with health care bills, or they've just arrived here. They're having a hard time. It's the price of gas. It's the price of food."

That's borne out by the November 2021 data from the U.S. Census Bureau showing one in 10 Connecticut residents living below the poverty threshold.

"There are parents in this community who are having to choose between keeping the lights and heat

on and feeding their families, and providing warm coats for their children," said Anita Ruggiero, another long-time volunteer, who had just come in after washing and drying laundry.

Having a warm coat may mean, she said, "a child is able to walk to school and not stay home on a really cold day, or an individual can go on a job interview during the winter months, or a senior is able to get out and about."

"It may not seem like a lot to you if it's just an old coat in the back of your closet, but to someone else, that could be a whole season of living," Ruggiero said.

While expressing gratitude for "everyone's efforts to take care of the most vulnerable members in our community over the years," McFarlane-Nwagboli reiterated a policy she's followed since the 1990s, when she operated the Clothing Bank out of two trailers in the parking lot of what would become the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Building.

"We don't want to insult

any of our shoppers with dirty or worn-out clothes," she said. "I want our people to find beautiful things that make them feel good inside."

Just then, a woman poked her head inside the door of the Clothing Bank. Ruggiero gestured her in.

"We can't cure COVID," said McFarlane-Nwagboli, as the woman headed to the children's section along the wall. "We can't solve poverty or unemployment or the problem of homelessness, but we can try to help those who come in. For that the volunteers have always been here, and the community has always come through."

"And right now we need the community's help through this latest challenge more than ever." » BHcare Clothing Bank is in the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Building, 30 Harrison Ave. Branford. Donations may be made Monday through Thursday, 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.; and Saturday 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. For information, call 203-483-2643. To learn more about BHcare, visit BHcare.org.