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Non-profits trying to fill school supply gap

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By Jessica Driscoll

With more families facing layoffs, wage cuts and decreasing hours, household budgets are being stretched to the extreme and parents must make tough decisions to prioritize their expenses, including purchases for the fast-approaching school year.

"The unemployment rate has skyrocketed in New Jersey and South Jersey and you also have people working part time who would like to be working full time," said Dr. John Worrall, an economics professor and chair of the college of arts and sciences at Rutgers University, Camden. "The kids need school supplies but families also face rising energy costs and other issues and many are making the tough decision of whether to feed a child or buy the supplies – a no-brainer. I know teachers who are constantly buying things out of their own pockets for the kids in their class without telling anyone, but they, too, are often strapped for money."

To Worrall, it then comes as no surprise that non-profit and volunteer organizations have stepped up to help fill the gap some families face.

"In this situation, people may question why school districts aren't supplying these things, but most of them have already faced a slump in their municipal and state revenues and local districts are also taxing people heavily already," said Worrall. "In times like these, volunteer organizations and charities have a strong role to play in helping the public find help."

Organizations that have taken on the school supply challenge are the Volunteer Center of Gloucester County in partnership with the Center for Family Services and Staples in partnership with DoSomething.org.

"The number of children in need of services has grown this year and the Center needs at least 1,500 backpacks this year in comparison to last year's 1,100," said Volunteer Center Executive Director Sue Dixon.

For the fourth year, the Volunteer Center is serving as a drop-off site for donated backpacks and school supplies such as pens, pencils, rulers, calculators, highlighters, markers and crayons, book covers, folders and binders, floppy disks and CDs, paper, scissors and glue to be distributed through the Center for Family Services' Operation Backpack. There is also a need for scientific calculators and other supplies for teenagers as well as monetary donations and gift cards.

"People's budgets are tighter and they don't have much money to spend, but these are vital supplies that children need to succeed in school," said Dixon. "We will accept donations for the Center until Aug. 17 and any donations after that date will be shared with the People in Transition program on campus."

The Volunteer Center is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and is located on the campus of Gloucester County College in room 425 of the Instructional Center. To make certain someone is available to accept your donation, call the office at (856) 415-9084 or e-mail sdixon@gccnj.edu.

Staples has teamed up with DoSomething.org for the second annual Do Something 101 school supply drive, a teen-centric donation program that will benefit the Boys and Girls Clubs of Gloucester and Camden Counties.

"The idea behind the drive is to raise awareness on the issue of the 13 million children living below the poverty line," said Staples Director of Community Relations Joy Errico. "Many kids and teenagers do not have the tools they need to go back to school and achieve success and this campaign raises awareness specific to that age group so teenagers can think of ways to collect supplies and drop them off at the Staples store matched with each local nonprofit. Staples customers will also be asked for dollar donations at the register."

Errico said that all donated items must be new core school supplies that can be purchased from any store. Local Staples stores for drop-off are located at 1907 Deptford Center Road in Deptford Township, 767 North Delsea Drive in Glassboro, 1075 Mantua Pike in West Deptford and 3501 Black Horse Pike in Washington Township.

"In challenging economic times, this becomes an even bigger issue which teens are sensitive to," said Errico. "They should be aware that this is the time to step up and help people who are less fortunate."

Modification of school policies and consumer behavior could help ease the stress of a new school year, according to Dr. Carol Kaufman-Scarborough, the professor of marketing and associate dean of undergraduate programs at the Rutgers University School of Business in Camden.

"There is a necessity for schools to think really hard about what is needed and if those supplies have to be specific to such a degree," said Kaufman-Scarborough. "I remember many years with my children having supplies left over but unable to be reused because they did not meet the teachers' specific requirements. With the new emphasis on sustainability and green initiatives, maybe districts should look at what could be reused or recycled."

For the consumer, said Kaufman-Scarborough, it's important to be a smart shopper.

"Often retailers will have online-only specials or buy one get one opportunities where you could make a good list and shop with friends to spread the expense," she said. "A number of stores also offer layaway and ways to pay for part of what's needed each time might prove more reasonably doable."

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