

Military members, families needed to help Santa bring Christmas Cheer

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Carolina Living editor

Sandra Wyrick is Santa Claus' representative in Onslow County.

Wyrick and the organization she leads, Onslow Community Ministries, is spearheading the Christmas Cheer program again this year to bring a little light to needy families and individuals in the county.

And she needs your help.

"It takes about 800 volunteers to put this on. It's a big project and we need all the help we can get," said Wyrick.

Christmas Cheer, now in its 36th year of existence in this county and in the 12th year run by Onslow Community Ministries, is a program that provides food and toys to needy families and individuals.

Wyrick said military volunteers are a key part of the process. "We need military volunteers in this community. For everything that we do, whether it's the soup kitchen, the shelter or the clinic, there's nothing that we could do without the military volunteers," she said, adding, "Sometimes they're not going home for Christmas and we become their family."

The Onslow Christmas Cheer program will kick off Oct. 27 from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. with the county's observation of Make a Difference Day, a nationally-observed day of community service sponsored by the Points of Light Foundation. Volunteers will set up this year's Christmas Cheer headquarters at the West Park Shopping Center at the intersection of Burgaw Highway and Richlands Highway in the former Winn Dixie location.

Then there will be a regular schedule of events where volunteers can come into the building and help out with the preparation and distribution of toys and food. (See the side bar on page 4D for dates and times.)

In addition to the actual volunteering, there are other ways military members and their families can help the Christmas Cheer campaign. One of them is to donate toys to the Toys for Tots program aboard base and in Jacksonville.

All of the toys collected in Onslow County go to the Christmas Cheer program. 1st Sgt. Dwight Jones, inspector-instructor first sergeant for Company F, 4th Tank Battalion, is

this year's Toys for Tots coordinator. "There is a wonderful collaboration between the two of us working together to meet the same goal so that we can maximize the assets that we both have to help the community," said Jones of working with Christmas Cheer.

Another way service members can help is to donate funds that can be used to purchase food and extra toys. Checks can be made out to Christmas Cheer and mailed to P.O. Box 4, Jacksonville, N.C. 28540. Additionally, many area schools are holding food drives for the Christmas Cheer program.

Last year Christmas Cheer helped 1,300 families and 4,200 individuals, including 200 military families.

Though Christmas Cheer volunteers sometimes go home tired from long hours of volunteering, Wyrick said, "We just go home with a smile on our face because we're doing something that money can't buy."

For more information about volunteering for or requesting assistance from Christmas Cheer, call 347-4646. It is requested that those wishing to volunteer, especially groups, call ahead because local businesses often donate lunches for the volunteers. Applications for Christmas Cheer assistance will start today from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and will be accepted every Tuesday and Thursday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. through Nov. 15.