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One tough year

By Michael Pound, Times Staff

For 15 years, Charolette Moffett has spent the holiday season outside next to a Salvation Army donation bucket. In that time, Moffett said, she's sought donations through all kinds of economic conditions.

This year, though, is as tough as she's ever seen it.

"We started a few days early this year, I guess to get a little head start on things," Moffett said of her fellow bell-ringers. "I think we'll get close to the goal, though — it seems like people always come through for us."

Moffett, a Rochester native, will work this season outside the Beaver Super grocery store on Third Street. She said she's generally an optimistic person and thinks Beaver County residents won't disappoint the nonprofit organizations that rely on donations, especially at this time of year.

But some of the people who run those groups aren't as certain that they're going to get the donations they need to provide services at a time when the poor economy means those services are in greater demand.

"We're working towards the same goal we've had for the last few years," said Bruce Simmeth, executive director of the United Way of Beaver County, which helps raise money for 20 agencies in the county with its annual fundraising campaign. "I think we're all aware that things could be tougher this year, so we didn't think it would be right to cut back on what we're providing for our member agencies."

DEMAND

With the economy in a nosedive through much of the year — and especially since the end of summer — the demand for services of the county's nonprofit agencies has shot through the roof. Clare Kushma, director of marketing and public relations for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, said the demand being placed on her agency has increased about 40 percent since July.

"We're calling it the 'perfect storm,' " said Kushma, whose agency serves Beaver and five other counties in western Pennsylvania. "Just when the demands are highest, our fundraising efforts are more challenging than ever."



The Times/LUCY SCHALY
Charlotte Moffett from Rochester stands outside of the Beaver Super on Third Street and waits for donations Thursday afternoon.

And at the Women's Center of Beaver County, Director Jill Marsilio-Colonna said tough economic conditions mean not only increased incidents of domestic violence, but more instances when some turn to the shelter for basic services they can't find anywhere else.

"They may be working a minimum-wage job that doesn't provide health insurance and they get into a bind, so they turn to us," Marsilio-Colonna said. "The traditional safety nets are failing, so people are turning to us."

The women's center has been forced to cut back on staffing levels and hours, switching some employees to part-time jobs in order to save money, Marsilio-Colonna said.

"And at the same time, we continue to lose grant money we've been relying on," she said. "Our budget for this year was actually less than it was a year ago, while the number of people we're working with has continued to increase."

SUPPLY

Despite the tough economy, Kushma said she thinks the people of the Pittsburgh region will come through for the area's nonprofit agencies, especially during the holiday season.

"What we saw during our fall appeal was that we had the same number of people giving, but they were just giving a little bit less than usual," she said. "But this is a region that has historically taken care of its own, and I'm confident that we're going to see close to normal levels of giving through the end of the year."

Marsilio-Colonna also said the women's center is hoping that regular donors will come through for her organization during the holidays.

"That's why we just sent our letter out a couple of weeks ago," she said. "We certainly understand that it's tough for everyone to get by these days, but we're hoping that a few extra people will see fit to help us out this year. We're hoping they understand how much we need it this time."

And standing in a snow shower outside the Beaver Super, Moffett said she's optimistic as well.

"People know how hard it is because everyone feels it," she said. "Beaver County will come through for the Salvation Army and everyone else. They always do."

Michael Pound can be reached online at mpound@timesonline.com.