

Season for sharing

By Hamilton Community News Editorial

Editorial

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Considering the recession that gripped Canada in 2008, it's no surprise that charitable donations across the country were down 5.3 per cent from 2007, according to recent data released by Statistics Canada.

Charitable donations surpassed \$8.1 billion in 2008, but overall, it was the lowest annual figure since 2005 when charitable donations were \$7.9 billion.

But it's not all bad news. Statistics Canada reports, based on tax returns, the number of donors increased 1.7 per cent to just under 5.8 million, meaning more Canadians are giving, they're just giving a little less.

Manitoba recorded the highest percentage of donors at 27 per cent. Ontario was second at 26 per cent. The national median donation was \$250, while in Ontario, the median was \$300. In total, Ontario residents gave more than \$3.71 billion to charity in 2008.

Hamilton has often been championed as a generous city. According to Statistics Canada, 134,360 people claimed charitable donations on their tax return. The average age of donors was 54, and the total donated to charity was \$205,705,000.

This total was a 5.6 per cent decrease from 2007, when Hamilton residents donated just over \$218 million.

Unfortunately, the need for charitable assistance has never been higher in Hamilton. According to statistics from the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty, more than 20 per cent of families (95,650 residents) in this region live in households with incomes below the poverty line.

Keeping a roof over their heads, and food on the table is a daily struggle in an economy that has seen thousands of job losses and high unemployment rates.

Thankfully, Hamilton is blessed with a large number of charitable organizations that are helping to fill in the income gaps. And while Statistics Canada figures show a decline in charitable giving, the numbers don't include the amount of goodwill that is not registered for tax claims. Be it a school food drive, or a local business collecting toys, Hamilton has continually answered the call when the need arises.

No where is this more true than at Hamilton Food Share, where desperate appeals in the last month have resulted in an increased level of people coming forward to help out those in need this Christmas Season.

"The challenge is still there to meet our target," said executive director Joanne Santucci. "But if donations keep coming in the way they have, I think we'll make it."

That's great news considering the amount of people requesting food hampers and other assistance at this time of year has increased 20 per cent over last year.

"People are coming forward from both sides of the fence," added Santucci. "Even people who don't have much to give are trying to give what they can."

Another local agency that has seen a marked increase in the number of calls for assistance this Holiday Season is Mission Services. According to Barry Coe, director of community relations and resource development, the agency will hand out more than 1,000 hampers in the coming days. "Hamilton is the most generous community I've ever lived in," he said. "People have really responded despite the difficult economic climate."

Coe said people have walked in off the street to donate anywhere from \$5 to \$5000.

If your own resources are low this year, support for the needy in our community doesn't necessarily have to come in the form of a cheque or a box of gifts or food – although those would certainly be welcomed. You can share the spirit of the season by inviting a family in need, an elderly person or youth without family support to Christmas dinner – a little gesture that could mean a lot.