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Around the Region: Group brings gifts to kids on reservation

Tribal members help the needy

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Children and parents line up for gifts during American Indian Partnership's 2012 gift delivery / Courtesy photo

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Dec. 23, 2013

Written by [David Murray](#) Tribune Staff Writer

It's been a difficult winter on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Money is scarce there during the best of times, but due to a drawn-out stalemate on the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, things are looking more bleak than usual this holiday season.

Paychecks to more than 800 tribal employees were finally issued late last week: one month since the last payroll was met Nov. 21.

But the annual Christmas per capita payments, typically paid out to all tribal members at this time of year, have not been forthcoming.

Responding to the financial need of many in the community, tribal members from across the reservation are stepping forward to ease the plight of their neighbors.

Whether it's paying down a family member's electric bill or checking to see if the person living next door has enough to eat, Blackfeet are pulling together to fill the gaps where local government is missing.

In the days leading up to the new year, one group in particular is focusing its efforts toward ensuring the youngest members of the reservation experience a little more Christmas joy.

For the past four years, American Indian Partnership (AIP), a nonprofit social welfare organization unaffiliated with tribal government, has organized a series of successful end-of-the-year gift giving events for Blackfeet children.

AIP's Blackfeet Children's Christmas Fund originally began to support an annual after-Christmas party, to which all Blackfeet children were invited. First celebrated in 2010, AIP's Christmas party quickly grew to the point where volunteers were able to distribute more than 2,000 gifts each year.

The number and value of the gifts were multiplied by Great Falls and Kalispell retailers, who generously granted AIP deep discounts on the purchase price of toys bought after Dec. 25.

The Children's Christmas Party was such a success that it repeatedly had to be moved to larger and larger meeting rooms to accommodate the increasing number of families who wanted to participate.

But there were also problems with the annual event.

"If you look at those first couple parties, they were fantastic," said Gregg Paisley, who has directed the Christmas Fund since its inception. "They were just the funnest thing ever for us and the kids, but the problem was that a lot of kids showed up who had had a very good Christmas already, and there were some who had nothing at all."

Like any other community across Montana, there is a wide range in economic well-being of families living on the reservation. Some households include adults with steady, good-paying jobs while others have little regular income at all.

The distribution of gifts at the Christmas parties did not take this into account, with relatively well-to-do children receiving as much as those who had next to nothing.

AIP organizers had already begun exploring ways reach out to the reservation's most disadvantaged youth when the Newtown school shootings took place Dec. 14, 2012. The massacre of so many children so close to Christmas put a damper on plans for another party.

“We didn’t feel like having a big, joyous, wild party when something like that had just happened,” Paisley said.

Instead, AIP organizers decided to take a more subdued approach and concentrated their efforts on distributing gifts door-to-door in some of Browning’s poorest neighborhoods.

The organization also dedicated half its Christmas budget toward buying more practical items like winter clothes and diapers.

Last year, using volunteers from the local police and fire departments, a fleet of emergency vehicles arrived to children’s homes unannounced to deliver a late Christmas surprise.

“When a citizen looks out the window and sees a dozen police and fire vehicles in front of their house with lights flashing and then someone knocks on the door, their first thought is usually not ‘Hooray — they must be here to give me gifts,’” Paisley said.

It didn’t take long, however, for the word to get out.

As the afternoon light dimmed, one small boy raced out into the cold streets determined to not let the Christmas convoy pass him by.

“I was standing near the back of one of the police trucks and saw Lockley Bremner (Browning’s mayor) walking up,” Paisley recalled. “He was carrying this little kid with bare feet, no coat and wearing only pants and a T-shirt.”

The boy was so excited about getting some gifts, he ran barefoot out into the subzero weather to get to the police truck. The first thing AIP volunteers did was get the boy fitted into new boots, snow pants and a winter coat.

“These are the things that make you realize why you do this stuff,” Paisley said.

It also served to re-emphasize the potential for a charitable effort targeted toward the neediest children.

Using attendance rosters obtained from the Browning Public School District, AIP has identified 143 children in the Browning area who have no permanent address.

This year’s delivery of gifts, clothing and food will make a difference for these children, many of whom come from home environments characterized by drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and neglect.

“These kids literally have nothing,” Paisley said. “It’s pretty miserable stuff.”