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Salvation Army testing credit card donations at kettles

BY Leah Thorsen • lthorsen@post-dispatch.com > 636-937-6249 | Posted: Saturday, December 11, 2010 12:15 am

FENTON • Sharon Hulsey, a bellringer for the Salvation Army, adds her voice to the ding-ding-ding of her bell.

"Merry Christmas! Your baby's so beautiful!" she shouted Friday as she sat next to her red kettle outside Walmart.

"Hi, sweetheart! I love your hat!" she called.

And on Friday, she added a new phrase:

"We take credit and debit!"

The local branch of the Salvation Army this week rolled out three machines that accept credit card donations, in hopes of soliciting contributions from cashless consumers who would otherwise walk by their donation kettles.

Other branches around the country have been using the machines for a couple of years, but they are new to the St. Louis area.

Average donations jumped to \$15 from \$2 when donors in Dallas, Los Angeles and Colorado Springs used the electronic payment machines in 2008, the Salvation Army said.

The idea took off last year at hundreds of locations, although no figure was available on how much money the cashless option raised. Donations from the kettles are used to provide toys for children, coats for the homeless, food for the hungry and to fund social service programs, the Salvation Army said.

"It's not that people don't want to give, it's that they don't have the cash or change," said Denny Kammer, vice president of ReliantPay, a Manchester-based company that processes credit card purchases. The company is providing the machines to the Salvation Army and is testing how popular they are at kettles in this area.

They said the machines do not store financial information, and donors can leave with a receipt to prove their charitable giving when tax time arrives.

He and Tom Mansfield, the company's president, stood outside the Fenton Walmart on Friday, paying attention to what worked and what didn't.

They launched the first kettle with a cashless option on Monday at the Schnucks in Des Peres, where it met with tremendous success, they said. The option also was popular in Chesterfield and Richmond Heights.

Not so in Fenton, where people had cash in hand as they walked out of Walmart.

Kammer turned the kettle so the sign faced shoppers as they emerged from the store, but people still didn't notice the tiny machine perched on top.

"We need a bigger sign," Mansfield said, and Kammer agreed.

But Missy Hampton of Mehlville noticed. She swiped her Visa debit card, punched in her \$1 donation and walked off with a receipt.

"I never have any cash, and I always feel bad walking by," said Hampton, 22.

Hampton is exactly the type of giver the Salvation Army hopes to bring in, said Will Becker, communications director for the charity's St. Louis region.

His agency raised about \$1 million from kettle donations last year. Becker said the group could increase the credit card kettles if this year's testing brings results.

Becker said his group will lose some of the money given by plastic because credit card companies keep a small percentage of each transaction. Nonetheless, Becker hopes donors will give more when they swipe a card than if they dig for change, and that the method will attract people who wouldn't give anything otherwise.

"No matter what avenue is out there for people to give, it's important for people to give," he said.