**NEWS FROM THERMAL BELT OUTREACH MINISTRY**

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**A BRIGHTER CHRISTMAS FOR HUNDREDS IN POLK COUNTY**

It will not be a totally bleak Christmas for hundreds of less fortunate families in Polk County this year, thanks to the Angel Tree project conducted by Thermal Belt Outreach Ministry. On Friday, December 7, Outreach distributed gift and food packages to a record number of clients who had prequalified for the annual holiday program.

“Because of the the generous support from the community, we are able to help more families and individuals than ever to avoid a dismal holiday season,” said Carol Newton, executive director of Outreach.

The gifts, personalized for each family, were handed out Friday afternoon at the Polk County 4-H Youth Center where volunteers and Outreach staff had worked all week sorting the gifts into family groups. “Logistically, it was a big chore,” Newton added, “but thanks to our dedicated volunteers, the process went smoothly.”

In addition to the Angel Tree gifts, The Salvation Army contributed boxes of food which were distributed to 380 families by the Outreach team working under the supervision of Jim McClintock, who manages the Outreach Pantry. Also dispersed were gift cards for BiLo and throws from Pure Country.

Volunteers for Friday’s distribution included individuals from law enforcement, churches and the Polk County schools’ Virtual Early College.

Outreach expressed appreciation to the organizations and individuals who made the annual project a success. “It is a wonderful demonstration of the Christmas spirit when people come together in an unselfish way to help others,” said Michelle Reedy, who manages the Angel Tree program. “We have coordinated closely Steps of Hope, the Department of Social Services and the Polk County Sheriff’s office to avoid duplications of our programs and to reach as many families as possible.”

Friday’s event was best described by a young mother who had lost her husband and job during the past year when she said as she received gifts for her three children, “Thank God for what you folks are doing. I’ve never had to ask for help like this before. I now have a better appreciation for people who give. I want to be on the giving side next year.”