

Inmates Help Create My Stuff Bags

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When children in Milwaukee who are destined for foster homes receive a My Stuff Bag from the Christ Child Society, they're not just getting the container and its contents — necessities and creature comforts that will help them through the days, weeks or months ahead.

They are also receiving a gesture of hope and compassion — an act of love from not just one or two, but countless strangers who worked together to compile the packet of new pajamas, shirts, underwear, socks, toiletries and a cuddly stuffed animal or toy.

And in the months of December, January and February, the addition of handmade scarves, hats and mittens give the My Stuff bag program an even more profound dimension, as these items are the work of inmates at the Milwaukee Women's Correctional Center (MWCC) on West Keefe Avenue.

“It's so wonderful because it gives them something to do, and they're giving back and helping these children.”

— Judy Keenan

The result is a mutually beneficial program that encourages creativity in the incarcerated women while providing the Christ Child Society and the children they serve with personalized, handcrafted winter-wear. “It's so wonderful because it gives them something to do, and they're giving



back and helping these children,” said Judy Keenan, who helps to coordinate the My Stuff Bag program for the Christ Child Society. “The hats, mittens and scarves are not really in our budget to purchase, but because we end up getting them for free, we're able to include those in the bags.”

Sgt. Sarah Terry of the MWCC said that programs like this provide an invaluable creative outlet for the inmates, while also giving them the ability serve others.

“They get bored, and when you get bored, your mind starts acting weird. It helps them, it really does,” she said. “And I have some really talented ladies — Martha-Stewart-talented. They do all the work; I just help them get the stuff.”

The Christ Child Society provides the MWCC with the yarn, and Sgt. Terry, who works in the property division and is an artist herself, distributes it to



Left: My Stuff Bags provide children entering foster care some of the comforts they will need.

Above: The Christ Child Society packs the My Stuff Bags for children. (Submitted photos)

the inmates, who are allowed to work on their projects in designated areas at designated times, while supervised. They create winter sets in small, medium and large.

“They love doing it. They love making the stuff,” she said. “They'll talk about what kid is going to get it. They'll try to make different sizes, or if they've just made a lot of sets for a girl, they'll want to make some for boys.”

The newer crafters will work on simpler designs like scarves, while the more advanced artisans will tackle mittens and hats, while helping to teach the others.

The average daily population of the MWCC is around 100 inmates. Roughly 44 percent have a mental health diagnosis, and many of the women have children in foster care themselves.

“It's really positive and it really helps the mental atmosphere,” said Sgt. Terry. “A lot of these people are more

emotional and artistic, and that's how a lot of them got on drugs or started drinking in the first place. This really helps them.”

The Christ Child Society's My Stuff bag has been a key aspect of their community outreach for close to 20 years, estimated Keenan. Once every month, members of the society gather to compile the bags and distribute them to seven shelters and agencies throughout southeastern Wisconsin. Last year, they gave more than 1,000 to children in need.

Keenan said that the Christ Child Society has heard from agencies they work with that the My Stuff bags — and especially the hats, mittens and scarves — are a big hit with the kids because it's something made just for them.

“One shelter told us they get a lot of donations — but these are just so personal.”