

Tabitha's Closet offers clothes for those in need

By Ashley Hatcher

Christmas comes every Tuesday for volunteers at Tabitha's Closet.

Tabitha's Closet is a clothes closet located in the First Christian Church on the Independence Square.

"I love seeing the look on the kid's faces when they get a new outfit," said Norma Tibbetts, clothes closet volunteer from the church's missions committee.

It's time to bundle up in warm clothing, and that's where Tabitha's Closet offers its services.

Coats, hats, gloves and sweatshirts are necessities in these frigid winter months. Open every Tuesday from August through June, the closet provides clothing to families in need within the Independence School District.

Volunteers from the church started the clothes closet seven years ago to help Procter Elementary School store clothing donations the school received.

"Procter needed an area to put the clothes," Tibbetts said.

Five years ago the closet was made available to families and students within all Independence schools.

"Norma is a previous school teacher. She said when a child comes to school with clean clothes, their self-esteem is improved," said Mary Jo Smith, volunteer at the clothes closet.

The clothes closet accepts gently used jeans, T-shirts, sweatshirts, coats and jackets. Money received through the church's missions committee goes toward new shoes, underwear, socks, hats and gloves. Donations must be clean and either hung or folded.

"People can bring things they would want to put on their own kids," Tibbetts said.

Donations can be dropped off at the church at 125 S. Pleasant St. on Tuesdays during clothes closet

hours from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., or during church office hours, she said.

"We just got a \$1,000 donation from Sam's Club," Tibbetts said. "We are very proud of that."

The clothes closet used that money to buy new shoes.

"We are always looking for a source to donate shoes and socks," Tibbetts said. "We just haven't found it yet."

An increase in donations required more storage space. Last year, the church allowed the clothes



Mary Jo Smith, Norma Tibbetts and Laura Shockley sort clothes for Tabitha's Closet located at First Christian Church in Independence. The clothes closet aims to serve children in the Independence School District and their families with clean, gently used items. 12.2.08 Julie Scheidegger

closet more room in the basement.

"It just grew from there," Tibbetts said.

Now two full rooms, the clothes closet is organized by size and age, from babies to adults. Sam's Club workers volunteered in July this year to help prepare for the 2008-09 school year.

"They helped size the clothes and get everything organized," Tibbetts said.

By August, the closet was ready to give.

The closet is open only to those families selected by the schools. Each Independence school has a family liaison who refers families to the clothes closet.

"I act as the middle-man between the school and the family," said Jason Rogers, family liaison for Fairmount Elementary School.

If a student is showing abnormal behavior in the classroom, the family liaison is notified. The liaison will then contact the family to see what's causing the student's misbehavior.

"I will stop by the home just to make sure everything is OK," Rogers said. "I'm not looking for something to be wrong. I'm just there to help."

Rogers says that is the main difference between what he does and what a social worker does.

"That's the best part of this job," Rogers said. "I just help the families find resources they can't tap into on their own."

The student and the family are each allowed five outfits, including five pairs of jeans, five shirts, one coat, one hoodie/sweatshirt, one pair of shoes, one pair of gloves, one hat and one package of socks and underwear.

"Everybody always wants the hoodies," Tibbetts said.

Sleeping clothes and dress clothes are optional, she said.

"The parents are allowed to take clothing if they need it," Tibbetts said. "People are pretty respectful of that. If they don't need it, they don't take it."

Every item is free. The only information the closet obtains from the family is their name.

"We want their name so we can track how many people we've helped," Tibbetts said.

With the country's current economic situation, the closet expects the number of families in need to increase, she said. New schools in the expanded western part of the district also bring in more families.

"Last year between Aug. 15 and mid-December, we clothed 150 people," Tibbetts said. "This year we will help 400 people before mid-December. We've had a lot of people this year who have never had to ask for help before."

Family liaisons realize the need for clothing and will donate items themselves. Any clothing the closet can't use or any over abundance of a certain item the closet will pass along to the Community Services League's back-to-work closet and to the Salvation Army's Crossroads shelter.

"We get a lot of turtlenecks, and nobody ever takes them here," Tibbetts said, "but they (Crossroads) like them."

The closet functions with the help of five volunteers from the church. Norma Tibbetts, Laura Shockley, Mary Jo Smith, Tina Mortensen and Libby Kunkle volunteer at the closet every Tuesday.

"We are all involved in the church," Smith said. "We remember what it was like to grow up in hard times and we just love doing this. God has blessed us and we're just trying to give back."

Each clothes closet volunteer serves a specific purpose every Tuesday.



Tabitha's Closet located at First Christian Church in Independence provides clean, gently used clothes for children in the Independence School District and their families. The clothes closet is open Tuesdays

"Everything on the racks is clean," Kunkle said.

She is in charge of washing the donated clothing.

"I look forward to Tuesdays to be able to do this," Kunkle said. "I know everyone that comes here appreciates it."

Laura irons the clothing after it's been washed and Mary Jo mends any clothing that needs it.

"This is the most rewarding thing I've ever done," Smith said.

Tibbetts has volunteered at the clothes closet since it was started seven years ago. She does it for the kids.

"I love seeing the little kids and the joy they have when they get new clothes," she said. "You just see the look in their eyes when they get new clothes and it's wonderful."