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Firefighters deliver toys, joy in Chico

By EVAN BURT - Staff Writer

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CHICO -- Firefighters and volunteers dressed as Santa made the winter season a little brighter for locals Saturday during the Christmas toy distribution.

Starting at 10 a.m., six Chico fire engines filled with toys and stockings drove out from the Fire Training Center and stopped to give needy families gifts.

"Our mission is that our firefighters are helping the less fortunate in their time of need," said Marie Fickert, fire inspector.

During the run, as engines pulled up in neighborhoods, Santas went door to door and delivered the toys. Santas went inside the homes and took the kids onto their laps, asking if they had been naughty or nice before unpacking the toys from their trusty sacks.

The kids took to Santa very strongly. Some excitedly tried to guess what was in their packages; others were too young to talk, and grinned instead.

Eliezer Ortiz, the father of two kids selected to receive presents, said he was overjoyed to have the fire department help make Christmas for his family.

"My daughter's favorite holiday is Christmas, and she's really happy," Ortiz said. "This was a great gift for us."

The engines visited 40 families this year, Fickert said.

The children were referred to the department by social services agencies, at which point community donations from businesses such as Wal-Mart and Batteries Plus fueled the shopping process of hunting down all the toys on the kids' wish lists, she said.

The distribution itself was a collaboration between the Chico Fire Department and the Chico Firefighters Association local 2734.

Notable contributors included the Virginia L. Jones Foundation, which donated \$5,000, and Safeway, which contributed \$400.

Safety is a chief concern for Chico, Fickert said. Because of the department's mandate to protect, they also gave out "safety stockings," which each came with a smoke detector, batteries and a flashlight. Lowe's Home Improvement donated 150 of the detectors.

Chico Fire Chief James Beery also inspected the current fire detectors in some of the homes to make sure they were operating properly.

"All the gifts in the world is great," Fickert said. "But if you have a fire, it could be a real tragedy."

Officials said in the past, the distribution was complicated by fewer engines, making the process take much longer. Since then, it has grown in popularity and gotten more efficient.

One of the Santas, who did not wish to be named, said the reception to the run is always great.

"We've been to Chapmantown where it looks like nobody's there," he said. "Then we hit the siren and

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kids come from everywhere. It's amazing!"

Hank Stefanetti, another volunteer at the distribution, agreed.

"It doesn't take much to convince me to be out here every year," he said.

This year's toy distribution is officially over. Additional name selections will not be accepted.

Staff Writer Evan Burt can be reached at eburt@chicoer.com.

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