

Elves on 'Mission' spread holiday cheer

By Dick Broom

BAR HARBOR — With the help of some 200 elves in Hancock and Washington counties, the Maine Sea Coast Mission has just finished collecting, wrapping and delivering Christmas presents to more than 3,000 residents of coastal and island communities.

It's something the mission has been doing for nearly a century. These days, social service agencies and churches help identify families in need, providing the name of each family member and what they might like for Christmas.

"Each person receives five to seven gifts, which typically include clothing and toiletries, and children get toys and arts-and-crafts items," said the Christmas program coordinator, Julie Patton. "Almost everyone gets a hat and mittens. We have a number of folks here and in other communities who knit for us, so we have a lot of homemade hats and mittens to give out."

She said about 85 percent of the gift items are donated; the rest are purchased.

"That's typically just before Christmas, when we've run out of our stockpile of items that people have contributed or we don't have the right clothing size for someone," she said.

Volunteer Santa's helpers at the mission's offices in Bar Harbor sort donated items, match the items with the needs or interests of each recipient, and wrap and label the gifts. The mission delivers the gifts by van to mainland communities and by mail boat or the Mission's vessel, *Sunbeam*, to the outer islands.

On the receiving end, volunteers — "We call them elves," Ms. Patton said — at churches, community halls, Head Start centers, nursing homes and jails handle the distribution of gifts to individuals and families.

Ms. Patton said the mission welcomes donations of unused clothes, toys and other items all year, not just in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

"It's a great way to re-gift if someone gives you something you don't want," she said. "We'll make good use of it."

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Head elf Julie Patton coordinates the Maine Sea Coast Mission Christmas Program, which distributes gifts to 3,000 people in Down East Maine over the holidays.