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Wells County's Hometown Connection

BLUFFTON, INDIANA

Off-season delivery

Ministry puts together packages for local inmates during coronavirus lockdown

By MARK MILLER

The pandemic has not slowed things down at all for Lemuel Vega. The Christmas Behind Bars program has not missed a beat.

Although not making any jail visits, which is something they normally do only around Christmas time anyway, the Bluffton-based ministry has continued to assemble and deliver their "care packages" of snacks, hygiene items — and bibles when they can — to jails and prisons across the country. "And hope," Vega emphasized. "That's what we bring to them, that there is hope."

After the Pendleton Correctional facility recently called to see if Vega could arrange to make a special delivery to their inmates during the continued coronavirus shutdown, he thought that perhaps the local jail might want an "offseason" delivery as well. "Certainly," was Wells County Jail Commander Karen Thompson's response. With the continued isolation due to the virus, Wells County Sheriff Scott Holliday certainly saw the benefit as well. Hence, local inmates will be receiving a special care package from Christmas Behind Bars.

The Bluffton-based ministry has continued to grow. Vega estimates they now deliver more than 60,000 care packages a year to jails and prisons as far away as Texas. The group makes regular visits to the Reception Diagnostic Center in Plainfield, which is where new state prisoners go from their county jails. Christmas Behind Bars ensures each inmate gets a small hygiene packet, "since they arrive there with absolutely nothing of their own," Vega said. It is at the RDC that Vega or a team member always offers a bible. "And we always need more bibles, new or used," he added.

Local law enforcement's involvement with Christmas Behind Bars goes much further beyond just accepting goodies, packets and visits. Blake Poindexter, Community Corrections director, regularly sends his home detention clients to CBB's Uniondale warehouse to help assemble the packages, which helps fulfill community service hours mandated as part of their sentence. "I have seen the benefits of them working here," Poindexter said. "Lemuel can relate to them. They see what's possible." "I think that's the biggest thing about this," Thompson added. "Sure, they appreciate the packages, but they can get to see that it can be done, that they can turn their lives around." Holliday agreed. "I've seen it often," he said. "The closer they get being released, their anxiety level goes way up because they're not sure what awaits them. Lemuel's program gives them some hope."

In addition to the Community Corrections clients, Vega has the support of "many other regular volunteers, not to mention the support we get from people like Steve Huggins and Pretzels and so, so many others," he said. "They have all made it possible to turn this little local effort into a national ministry. It's just such a blessing I have to be a part of it."

Along those lines, he added, the ministry could use a good electric fork lift. If anyone has one they'd like to be put to use, he can be contacted at 260-827-8835.

It is not often that Lemuel Vega gets a call from a prison, requesting him to bring his packages. It is normally the other way around. When he first started his jail ministry, he often had to really "sell" what he was trying to do to county sheriffs and jail wardens. So when he got a call in May from the Pendleton facility — in which he had once been an inmate — "that was really cool," he said.

Their first request was to ask if Vega had any "product" he could donate for the prisoners, so he delivered a number of boxes of candy bars, suggesting they perhaps give the prisoners one per week for several weeks, "spreading out the blessings," as he put it. "And then she wanted to know if we had any bags," he continued. So he gathered up several more items and the bags and drove to Pendleton last week.

"So we arrive at the warehouse and there are several assistant superintendents, and eight to 10 inmates and the National Guard," he said, adding that everyone was wearing masks and keeping six feet apart. In a short period of time, about 2,000 packages were assembled. "We got more letters of appreciation from these little, unexpected packages," Vega said. A medium security facility is nearby, so Vega figured "why not?", and arranged a delivery there for about 1,300 inmates.

When he got home, it just seemed like a natural thing to do to call the local jail. "We care about all our jails, but especially our home jail," Vega explained. "We just want to bring a bit of hope." Vega often drops off boxes of candy bars and snacks to the jail for them to use as rewards for inmates' good behavior and as treats for the jail's staff and the county deputies. He does the same at the Corrections office, for which Poindexter is also appreciative.

"The message is hope," Vega continued. "For some that means getting their GED, for others it is to kick their drug habit and maybe turn their lives around. I've been there, I know the hopelessness and despair of being in there. That's what we're trying to overcome."



These final "care packages" are being readied for delivery to the Wells County Jail. Gathering at the Christmas Behind Bars warehouse in Uniondale are, from left, Jail Commander Karen Thompson, Wells County Sheriff Scott Holliday, Lemuel Vega of Christmas Behind Bars, Community Corrections Director Blake Poindexter and CBB volunteer Brandi Bywater. (Photos by Mark Miller)



"We can always use more bibles," Lemuel Vega of Christmas Behind Bars said. "I cannot possibly overemphasize the importance of having these bibles, whether new or used, available to hand out. They are worth their weight in gold." Bibles can be dropped off at several locations in Bluffton, including the library, Outdoor Concepts and the News-Banner office.

miller@news-banner.com

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• The Department of Correction has made a two-minute video of Christmas Behind Bars' recent visit to Pendleton: <https://bit.ly/3he7psr>