

LOCAL

Gift program aims to make kids smile

By Theresa Freeman
DAILY NEWS STAFF

ASHLAND - A new program run out of the Community Center aims to put a smile on the face of every child celebrating a birthday.

The Youth Advisory Council has joined forces with Smiling Kids Inc. of Southborough to give children in need a toy for their birthday, said council Director Susan Gauvin.

In the Happy Birthdays For All program parents also will receive a \$35 Target gift card on their child's birthday, paid for by Smiling Kids, she said. "Birthdays are something everyone can relate to," said Gauvin. "It's once a year, and it's so disappointing if you can't get a gift you like."

The program's details are still being finalized, but so far 43 children have been accepted to the income-eligible program, Gauvin said last week. The program will launch next month or

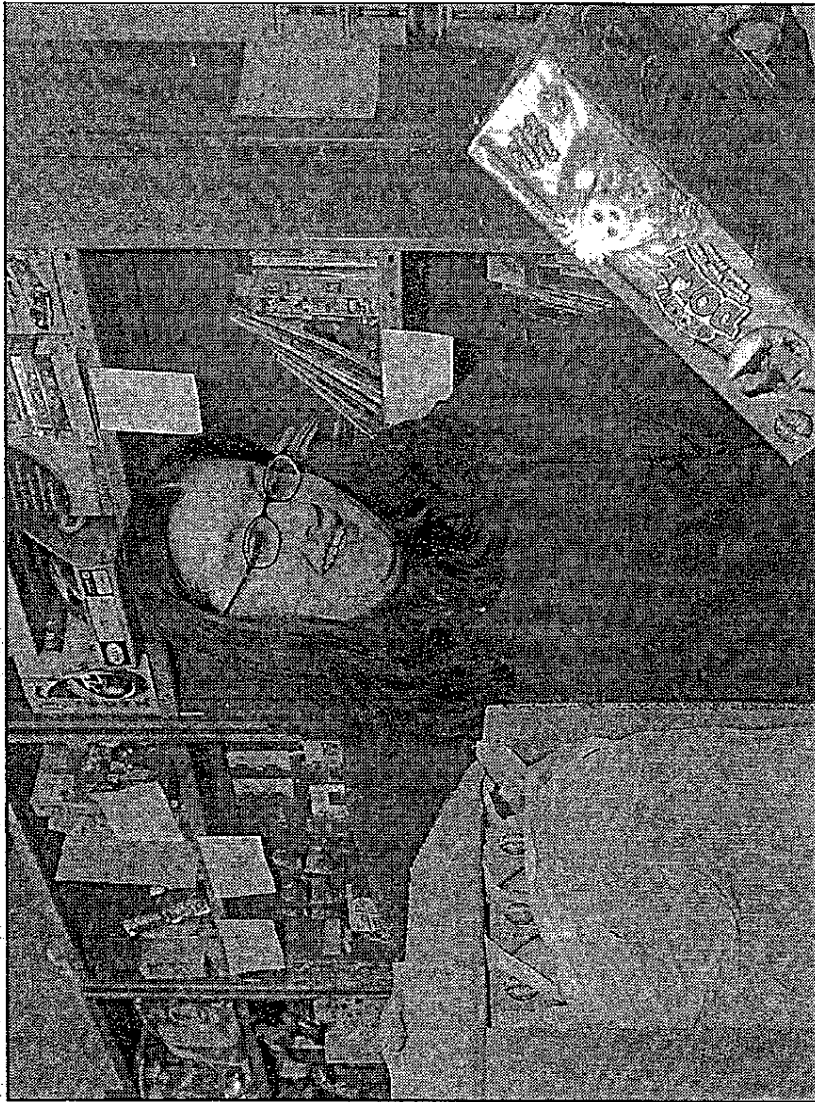
in April, she said. Toys and gift cards will also be available for families in emergency situations, like being displaced by a fire, said Gauvin. The initial stock of toys left over from the holiday drive will get the program going, she said.

"It kills me to see all these toys in the back room just sitting there," said Gauvin. "The best part, in a way, is to see parents shopping for toys."

Happy Birthdays For All also opens up the Youth Advisory Council to accepting toy donations year-round, said Gauvin. In the future, the town's food pantry also might be able to give parents birthday cake baking supplies, she said.

Any donation "will get to a kid in need, it just depends on what time of year they get them," said Gauvin. "This program has such room for expansion."

Karen Sommers, who with her husband Bob runs the non-profit Smiling Kids, Inc., said the



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Youth Advisory Director Susan Gauvin unpacks toys that will be given to children in need on their birthdays.

organization was excited to lend a hand, especially because two of its board members - Erin Kane and Tracy Bodio - live in Ashland.

"It's really people just doing good, and we're just the conduit," said Sommers.

Smiling Kids also is beginning to work with youth commissions

in Natick, Holliston and Hudson, Sommers said. A successful year of fund-raising means the group is aiming to double, to 2,000, the number of children it gives a special birthday gift this year.

"Even if you don't have kids, you know what it's like to have a birthday and to be recognized

on that day," said Sommers. The application deadline for this year's Happy Birthdays for All program is Feb. 24. For more information, call Gauvin at 508-881-0140, ext. 18.

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