Bright Futures flooded with donations for school children

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

For a program initially viewed with wariness by the USD 480 Board, the Bright Futures organization has succeeded brilliantly. That's entirely due to the community's efforts, said Bright Futures member Lisa Hatcher, at Monday night's school board meeting.

"The great news is that the community has really rallied," she said, explaining that the reason for Bright Future's appearance on the agenda was connected to high donation levels from people in Liberal.

"They have donated money, clothing, supplies, far beyond what we expected or hoped for," Hatcher said. "We're out of space."

After some discussion, the board voted unanimously to give Bright Futures storage space on district property. Bright Futures will provide the shelving, bins and a complete, detailed inventory list. The district will allow a staff member to enter the inventory items into the district's supply database, thus allowing principals and teachers to see what is available for students in need.

"How much time will that take?" asked board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott. "I just don't want someone to have to take away from their regular work to do that."

"Maybe an hour or two," said auxiliary services director Robert Burkey. "If it's too much, I'll do it myself on the weekend."

A non-profit community group in Liberal, Bright Futures seeks to fill the gaps for needy students and their teachers. In previous years, school principals frequently heard stories from teachers who were concerned about students living in poverty. Children came to school hungry, cold, and tired. Some even explained to their teachers that the homework they'd handed in was messy because the electricity services had been turned off at their homes, and they had completed worksheets outside, under a streetlight.

In response, teachers often spent their own money to help students. They purchased school supplies, coats and gloves, even food for boys and girls who might go home for the weekend to an empty house and nothing to eat.

Liberal residents and educators have worked to alleviate such problems by way of a "grass roots, community based program that creates partnerships and utilizes community resources for the community's children," in accordance with the Bright Futures organization, based in Joplin, Mo. There, 54 percent of the publicly educated students live in poverty, and the community worked to give each student "a bright future."

Though promoters were enthusiastic about bringing Bright Futures to Liberal, the school board responded with reserve. Board members said they were reluctant to establish yet another school-based program that sought to address family and social deficits; once started, they worried, such programs often continue indefinitely, requiring ongoing infusions of taxpayer

money even though they appeared to be a gift in the beginning.

In the end, Bright Futures established itself as an independent agency that works with the district, but not as part of its budget.

That's a contrast to other Bright Futures affiliates, said Hatcher.

'We're kind of a hybrid," Hatcher said. "Everybody else has a district person" who handles tracking and distribution of donations. For now, that person is Hatcher. Soon, however, Bright Futures will hire its own part-time staffer.

"We've received an allotment of $800 a month [from an outside donor] to hire someone to gather things in the community, because of our affiliation with Bright Futures USA," Hatcher told the board. "It's kind of a glorified volunteer job," she said, but the allotment will help the right person to spend the time that's needed.

The board expressed appreciation to Bright Futures, which has already handed out supplies to 30 students for the 2013-14 school year.

"Bright Futures," said board member Nick Hatcher, "is a great thing."