

This gift delivery was sparked by one Ventura County firefighter's own experience

Ventura County Star

A group of firefighters spread cheer Friday to children at Ventura County Medical Center by handing out toys. For one of the helpers, the effort carried special meaning.

Michael Katan, a firefighter-paramedic with Ventura County Fire Department, suggested the stop after his own daughter, Elliana, 7, spent three nights in the hospital in October and received gifts from visiting firefighters.

"They were just handing out toys," said Katan, who's assigned to Piru-based Medic Engine 28.

He, wife Lauren and Elliana were surprised by the visit from people outside the hospital staff. It was a welcome relief and a bright spot in an otherwise scary situation.

"We were taken aback," he said. "It was a really cool gesture."

So Katan approached his own department about doing the same in Ventura County.



The opportunity manifested with the annual Spark of Love Toy Drive, a project of KABC-TV Channel 7 in conjunction with fire departments across Southern California.

In Ventura County, fire stations in Ventura and Oxnard joined with the county's 33 as donation sites, said Crystal Stratton, who organizes the county program. This year, other county agencies and businesses were added for an estimated 100 collection points, she said.

"It's a huge combination of efforts," Stratton said. "It's pretty amazing."

About 55,000 toys are expected to be distributed either through the pop-up holiday store run by the Children's Services Auxiliary of Ventura County or deliveries to nonprofits such as the Westminster Free Clinic in Thousand Oaks and Kids and Families Together, a Ventura nonprofit that supports foster care, she said.

But the hospital visit was a new stop this year.

Katan was joined Friday by his crew of engineer Chris Salvage and Capt. Hector Garcia as well as Capt. Brian McGrath, a spokesman for the agency.

"The best way to give back is to do that exact work, that kind of sparked it," Katan said.

When the crew handed out the toys Friday, the kids' faces lit up. He said the firefighters visited about eight children and handed out toys to a handful along the way.

"It was everything you thought it would be," he said. "It's really cool to see that."

Katan's daughter is doing well now. He's happy to pay forward his own experience to other families who have loved ones in the hospital.

"It makes you grateful, especially around the holiday time," he said.