

Riders dash to donate storm aid

By AL FRANK

NJ Transit officials said they were overwhelmed by the generosity of rail and bus riders who contributed school supplies and shoes to Florida schoolchildren who lost possessions in Hurricane Andrew.

The agency set up collection boxes at major terminals last week, and the thousands of new pencils, crayons, notebooks and dozens of pairs of shoes dropped off by commuters made up more than 300 parcels.

"We collected so much we lost count," said spokesman Armando Arrastia. "We had forms and people getting ready to count, but the volume was such we just couldn't keep track."

The collection bins were available at six terminals in New Jersey and New York last week.

On Wednesday, so many goods were collected that volunteers quickly filled all 120 cartons donated by Sanford Levine Packaging Co. of Fairfield. The company immediately agreed to provide more, Arrastia said.

A special request for hard-sole shoes, to protect the feet of children from broken glass and other debris, was answered with at least 100 pairs, Arrastia said.

Also donated were hundreds of stuffed animals that school counselors said were useful in working with youngsters traumatized by the storm and destruction.

Authorities estimate that up to 60,000 students lost homes and schools in the storm.

The parcels of donations are being taken to Florida free by Amtrak aboard its No. 91 train, which leaves Penn Station in New York every morning for a 30-hour trip to Miami. About 60 of the 50-pound boxes have been dispatched so far.

Pupils at the Glenfield School in Montclair, Rutherford High School and St. Frances Cabrini School in Piscataway also sent supplies.