Group throws line to kids in need
Volunteers say fishing event gives disabled or terminally ill children a chance to relax, have fun

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For children who are disabled or terminally ill, getting a surge of adrenaline is just what the doctor should have ordered.

Although members of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance are not physicians, they know taking children fishing or hunting helps lift their outlook on life.

"One of the things you have to understand is that when these kids get sick, their whole life changes," said James Lakeman, chairman of the United Special Sportsmen Alliance. "It goes from playing sports to visiting the hospital - going fishing or hunting makes kids feel normal."
Thursday, this grassroots, nonprofit organization will host over 75 terminally ill and disabled children from 10 states at the alliance's Outdoor Water Sport Event at a cranberry marsh between City Point and Black River Falls, said Brigid O'Donoghue, president and founder of the alliance. After she granted the first wish, the gratification of the act compelled her to start the organization in 2000.
"It was so moving that I thought I would do a couple more (wishes)," O'Donoghue said. "Since then, I've granted over 2,000 wishes."
Their second annual event in Wisconsin is made possible, she said, by the generosity of the all-volunteer team and corporate sponsors. And because their donations exceed the number of children they have, O'Donoghue said, people interested in enrolling a child should.

"When I find a child, I immediately try to find a place for them," O'Donoghue said. "Participating is easy, and it's free."
Arpin resident Wendy Lorence is excited her seven-year-old son, Dylan, will have the opportunity to go fishing with the alliance. She said the experience will help distract Dylan from his illness, neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder of the nervous system that causes tumors to form on nerves in the body.

"I'm glad he's going because that way, Dylan can see he's not the only one in a wheelchair," Lorence said. "I hope he finds a little more acceptance being there. He needs to accept he's going to be in a wheelchair forever."
For volunteers like John Olik, attending the event is a gratifying experience.

"It's a great time for the kids, but the volunteers participating walk away with the most because there's a lot of joy in giving," said Olik, principal at Pittsville High School. "It's like when you give a gift at Christmas - you feel better about the gift you give than the one you receive."
Two years ago, Jason Dorshorst was in a motorcycle accident that left him in a wheelchair. Today, he's very active and wants to offer his support to other youngsters.

"I'm in a wheelchair not knowing the reason why," said Dorshorst, 23. "After the accident, I had people help me; if I can do that in return, then I can give some of that support to someone in my situation.

"If I can help one young person be more active, then it's worth it."
For parents whose child has passed away, the event can be a healing experience.

"Sometimes when you lose someone you love so much, being around other children can be very healing for them," O'Donoghue said. "Last year, there was a man who came back after his child
died. He picked up this little boy and held him in his arms, and the emotions I saw on his face were breath-taking."
Next week, Lakeman will drive a motor home from Cumming, Ga. to Pittsville, making about six stops along the way to pick up several children and parents.

"It's going to take about two days to make the trip, but at least we don't have to stop for bathroom breaks," Lakeman said.

And when children are able to catch fish, Lakeman said, they get a sense of fulfillment.

"They get to feel like they're a provider because the fish they catch is the fish their family will eat," Lakeman said. "In a way, it improves their health because of how it makes them feel, which gives them the adrenaline to move forward and have a much more positive outlook."