

OPERATION SANTA IOWA



Christmas is a magical time for children—a season of joy, tradition, and lasting memories with family. Sadly, for many children in foster care, those experiences aren't always guaranteed.

Traci Schermerhorn, executive director and co-founder of Foster SQUAD, witnessed this reality when her foster son wasn't able to visit Santa with his biological mother. Wanting his mom to share in that moment—and recognizing the challenges faced by both foster and biological families—she envisioned of a holiday celebration where foster, biological, and kinship families could come together in a safe, private space. That vision became Operation Santa.

What began in 2022 as a small gathering of 55 children quickly grew into something bigger. At the very first Operation Santa celebration, children separated in different foster homes reunited with their grandparents at the Des Moines Public Library—exchanging gifts, reconnecting, and experiencing the magic of Christmas together. Schermerhorn knew she had found something truly special.

In 2023, Foster SQUAD partnered with Four Oaks to brighten the holidays for more than 520 children. With support from seven Polk County nonprofits, every child received gifts from their wish list and enjoyed a joyful celebration at the Blank Park Zoo—all made possible through the community's generosity.

By 2024, Schermerhorn and Four Oaks CEO Mary Beth O'Neill set their sights higher: to bring Operation Santa to children across Iowa. Partnering with nonprofits statewide, they hosted 20 Christmas parties and fulfilled 2,616 wish lists, making Operation Santa Iowa a new statewide tradition of joy and connection.

Today, Operation Santa Iowa is more than a program—it's a movement of care and compassion. It's an opportunity for Iowans to show our most vulnerable children that they are valued, loved, and celebrated. You can join the mission by purchasing gifts from a child's wish list or making a financial donation. Together, we can ensure every child experiences the magic of Christmas.

"Every child should feel the joy and wonder of the holidays. The amazing team at Foster SQUAD and Four Oaks Family and Children Services partner to make that possible with Operation Santa Iowa. Last year, state employees supported Operation Santa Iowa with gifts and donations for children in our foster care system. It was such a success that we plan to make it a part of our holiday celebration again this year, and I strongly encourage others to consider supporting this worthwhile cause."

-Governor Kim Reynolds

www.fostersquad.org/santa

