

Lewis G. Watkins Detachment #1131 Toys for Tots Program

The Marine Toys for Tots Foundation has designated the Lewis G. Watkins Marine Corps League Detachment #1131¹ as the official Toys for Tots (TFT) Program coordinator for Oconee County as there is no local Marine Reserve Center in the county. The Detachment has managed the annual Toys for Tots campaign since 2011.

Initial Toy Distribution. In the early years, the Detachment did the traditional program of accepting applications for assistance, collecting the toys, packing bags for each child, and having a mass distribution evening as we approached the Christmas holidays. This process grew unwieldy as the campaign grew.

Community Approach. In 2011, the Detachment forged a partnership with the town of Salem, SC where they identified the truly needy families in their town, coordinated with those families, sponsored toy drives and collections, assisted selecting and packing the toys for their children, and held their own distribution evening. Our Detachment had members present for toy distribution. The remainder of the local program continued as in the past. In 2011, the Detachment packed toys for 727 children, and the parents of about 90 percent (653) showed up to collect their toys. Our toy donations to Christmas For Kids helped address the needs of an additional 900 children in 2011.

The experience with Salem was so successful that in 2012 we expanded our community efforts and established programs based on the Salem model with the communities of West Union, Walhalla, Central, Participants and Anderson, as well as continuing with Salem, the Littlejohn Community Center in Clemson, the Old Carolina Smokehouse in Piedmont, and a continuing distribution program in Seneca. Anderson became a separate entity in 2012. The community organizations sponsoring Toys for Tots has evolved over time and was affected by COVID in 2020 and 2021 due to health-related concerns. In 2022, another Marine Corps League Detachment assumed responsibility for Pickens County. Currently there are nine organizations/ churches plus the Seneca Police Department that participate in the Oconee County Toys for Tots Program.

These efforts allowed the Detachment to promote a more focused Toys for Tots Program where the communities themselves took ownership of the recipient application and vetting process and toy distribution. The organizations benefitted by improving connections with their communities; the Detachment gained greater efficiencies in collecting, sorting, ordering, and distributing the toys. The community outreach approach also provided excellent visibility for Toys for Tots within the communities.

TFT Family Applications. The Detachment uses a standardized form each year to gather names. Information includes the name, address and contact information for the family; children's names, ages, and gender; and the type of assistance the family may be receiving to help determine the need.

¹ The Detachment is named for Staff Sargent Lewis G. Watkins, USMC, the only Medal of Honor recipient in Oconee County. He was killed in action during the Korean War. The Detachment was established in 2003.

The form also includes a statement by the parent/guardian/grandparent with legal custody stating: "By making this application I am confirming to you that I have not requested, nor am I going to request, assistance from another organization providing toys this year. If I am found to have requested support from another organization, I understand that I will not receive any support from Toys for Tots." The family member signs and dates the form with the acknowledgement that "I confirm all statements made on this application are true."

The Detachment provides toys for children up to 12. Older children of younger siblings/family members also receive gifts. Adults with special needs are also provided for on a case basis.

Community leads collect the applications and verify need. Individuals that are not part of a community unit are handled by the Detachment as individual submissions. The Detachment records applications in a database for tracking purposes and to print family and child bag labels.

How We Obtain Toys. Toys are sorted into several age groups, i.e., 0-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12 and 13+. These groupings are established at the national TFT Foundation. Each year the TFT Foundation sends some toys to our organization. These are sorted and become part of that year's campaign. The bulk of toys are collected from official TFT boxes in local establishments. Those collections do not always match the number and gender of children in the various age groups, so the Toy Store Coordinators have the ability to purchase additional toys/gifts from the national Foundation at reduced prices based on arrangements the Foundation has made with several suppliers.

TFT "Store." Prior to 2023, the TFT Coordinator worked with local businesses to identify a vacant commercial property for use as the temporary storage and toy distribution point. Owners received an IRS tax break for "donating" the space. The national TFT Foundation focuses on toys and minimizing administrative cost overhead, so a small storage unit was typically rented each year for storing collection boxes and a small number of holdover toys for the next year's campaign, and the TFT train float. In 2023, Detachment #1131 established a relationship with the Blue Ridge Community Center/Code Learning Center on Holland Avenue in Seneca to use the Center as the new TFT "home." Several former classrooms have been modified for use as storage, toy collection and processing, and toy distribution.

Toys, Bicycles and Books. Each child receives four quality gifts. Toys and games make up the bulk of gifts for younger children; older children's gifts include personal items like hair dryers, make up kits, watches, board games and headphones/speakers. Stuffed animals are made available as "free" items and each organization receives one or more bag of small items that are handed out as stocking stuffers. Employees at several businesses and participants in special events have contributed bicycles the past few years in lieu of toys. These are distributed to the community organizations on a pro rata basis.

Community "Shoppers." The community leads arrange their own volunteers and come to the store at the designated time. Each child has a bag with pre-made labels and completed bags are placed in one or more family bags with labels. Families are not allowed to pick their own toys however they may be aware of specific items the child would like. Groups range from a handful of children up to about 100. Shopping and packing typically takes about an hour so several organizations are scheduled for each of the three "shopping" days.

Donations. All locally collected cash donations and donations made through the national Toys for Tots website (www.toysfortots.org) are returned to Oconee County by the Foundation so all funds contributed in Oconee County remain local. Locally collected funds are sent to the national Toys for Tots Foundation for 501(c)(3) accountability purposes before being deposited in an authorized local account. The national Toys for Tots Foundation is top-rated by Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org) and Charity Watch (www.charitywatch.org). Consequently, all online donations on the Lewis G. Watkins Detachment's Toys for Tots website page are directed to the national TFT Foundation website.

Reporting. The national Foundation has mandatory reporting for toys collected, toys distributed, number of families and children serviced. Each year's campaign typically ends in early/mid-January.