

## Chester / Southern Montgomery - PACHST



Chester County Toys for Tots – 2023 “It’s not an SOP because the Foundation has an SOP, but this is how things work here” document

My name is Jeffrey Smith. As of 2020, I am the Coordinator for the Toys for Tots campaign covering Chester County, PA. as well as parts of neighboring Montgomery County

If you’re reading this, you’re one of the following:

- Someone offering feedback on the insanity
- My replacement, because I won the lottery, got hit by a car, or both at the same time
- One of my volunteers taking on additional responsibilities, who wants a better high-level overview of the whole program
- One of my peers who is curious how we run the program here. It’s very, *\*very\** important to keep in mind that every campaign is different not just because of the choices of the coordinator, but because of the facts on the ground. I have plenty of potential sources for volunteers and toy drop sites; others do not. I have so much need there is a limit on how much I can offer; other campaigns can be more generous. What works for me may not work for you.

You may have picked up my sense of humor by the first couple of paragraphs. Buckle up, because this isn’t an ‘official’ document, so I’m allowed to indulge this as an outlet for snark.

Please understand this is *\*not\** a replacement for the Toys for Tots SOP, and it especially is not a replacement for the annual training – copies of which can be found on the Secure Site. This can offer some context that may help you at the end of the day, but if there is a disconnect between what you see here and what is in the SOP, *\*I am wrong\**.

This will start out general, then focus on the 2023 plan for my campaign. Because this turned out to be bigger than I planned, it has been cut into four docs:

- Overview
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Timelines
- Templates

So, here we go

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# General background on Toys for Tots

## Point #1: Why we do what we do

To help kids.

That's basically the mission at the end of the day. There is all sorts of background info out there about the origin of Toys for Tots and how it links in to the Marines, but at the end of the day, we're here to help kids. Everything else is gravy.

If you're another Coordinator, you have access to the Secure Site, with much more detailed information on this. If you're not, shoot me an email – none of this is secret stuff, but it's also not just posted on Instagram

The most important thing to know before reading the following is that this is how \*I\* do things. There are hundreds of individual Toys for Tots campaigns, and about 50,000 volunteers across the nation... and ~20 full time employees of the Toys for Tots Foundation. They cannot micromanage us, and to their credit, they don't even try – except for making sure we're not careless with the cash or engaging in behavior that would bring disrepute to Toys for Tots. Those are two **HARD** rules you do not play with.

For a little background, there was a Toys for Tots campaign in Chester County before I signed up, and my predecessor ran it for a long time – but he couldn't find anyone to hand it over to when he had to step back, so there was no campaign in 2019. So, in 2020, I effectively started from scratch – I had some information on people that had been worked with before, but no handoff of processes and procedures

## **New Campaign Prep Work #1: Email**

If you are a Coordinator, and you do not currently have access to your Toys for Tots Email address, drop everything and focus on that. Yes, I'm sure your [ThisTotallyIsntAScam@gmail.com](mailto:ThisTotallyIsntAScam@gmail.com) address and you have been through a lot, but people who don't know you are going to be much more comfortable with that @toysfortots.org email. Reach out to [itsupport@toysfortots.org](mailto:itsupport@toysfortots.org) if you have questions

## **New Campaign Prep Work #2: LCO Site**

Get used to visiting <https://lco-admin.toysfortots.org/>, because it is your new best friend.

If you're a Coordinator and haven't fiddled with it before, there is some canned training in the Secure Site, and a 'setup wizard' you can use to set up a base campaign fairly easily.

If you are an assistant coordinator or a Team Lead, there is a different set of credentials that gives access to 90% of the main site - which means you can *\*absolutely\** screw everything up if you're not careful. So, be careful. If you're a volunteer, you're mostly going to be in the "Manage Online Forms and Requests" section; we'll go into that in more detail below

## **New Campaign Prep Work #2.5: Phone number**

It is mandatory that a Toys for Tots campaign have a phone number. For my campaign, I just have it go to my phone, with a voicemail that pointedly tells people to email me. If you'd prefer to keep them separate, look at Google Voice

## Coordinator Responsibility #1: Getting a warehouse

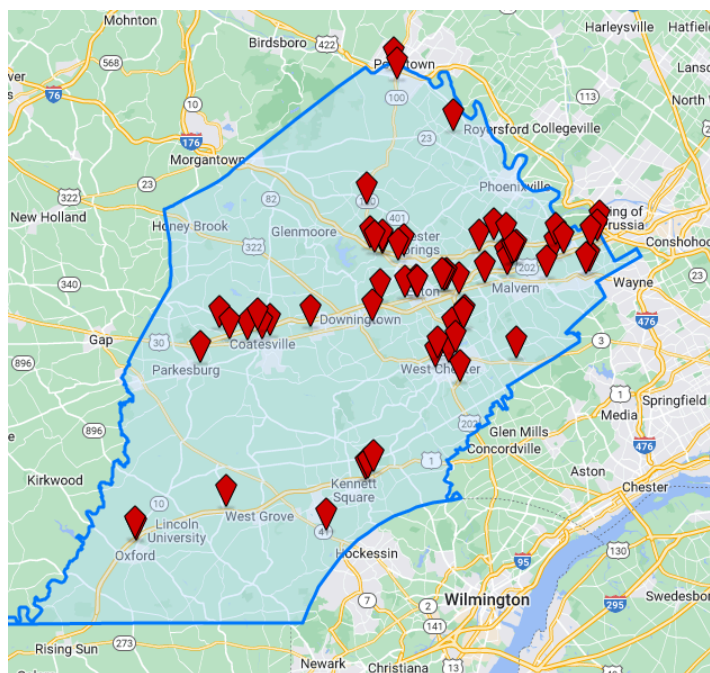
A Toys for Tots campaign is, at its core, all about logistics. Starting in September, supplies such as Drop Boxes, posters, promo materials, and other long lead time support from the Foundation. In November, supplemental toys from the Foundation – and you do *\*not\** want to miss out on those. And of course, all the toys from your toy drop boxes, when then need to

Assuming you have a garage you'd like to park in, or a house you'd like to live in, you're gonna need some space. But you can't *\*rent\** it, because you don't have anywhere *\*near\** enough funds for all your needs – money you are spending on rent is money you're not spending on toys

So, get used to groveling.

My first stop is loopnet.com, which lists commercial real estate. Unless you're absolutely desperate, the space you're requesting needs to be in your coverage area.

My first pass is any place for lease that is over 10,000 square feet and is currently available. This is what comes up on my map.



Look at all those locations, easy peasy, right?

Not so much. The vast majority of these property owners have absolutely no interest in tying up their property for no rent for three or four months, so you're going to need to work.

Many of them will have a flier like this attached

<https://www.loopnet.com/common/viewer/?file=https://images1.loopnet.com/d2/6TfxbrSVLgOL4qvm4xvuvCTJ047ivJEb1sfeoNusK7o/SSHFlyer1060AndrewDriveV3.pdf>

Even those that don't will have a contact name, Googling around will usually allow you to locate a contact. Start with email, but don't be surprised if you need to pick up the phone

There are examples of some templates at the end of this document

There's a balancing act here – the earlier you ask, the longer you're asking for the owner to lend you the space, and the less likely you are to get support – but if you wait too long, you're going to be hampering yourself. I wouldn't start any later than mid August, hoping to get an agreement by mid sept – keeping in mind the paperwork can take some time. You want your \*end\* date to be mid Jan, so you're not cleaning up on Dec 31st

This is what success looks like – note that I didn't get into the site until the 15<sup>th</sup> of September if memory serves



Mail - Chester  
County PA Toys for

You are going to need a Certificate of Insurance and a lease. The latter is dependent on the business loaning you space, the former is via the secure site, section 6, storage certificate of liability insurance request form.

Along with giving them credit – my Warehouse donors are treated as top level sponsors, because they're \*more\* valuable than a large check - make sure you process the Service Support document as soon as you can (ie: the day after your lease is up and you move out), and get them over to the Foundation via email. The Tax Receipt will take awhile to process; you don't want to be at the back of the pile when the Foundation starts chunking through these. I can send examples if you want them, email me at [chester.county.pa@toysfortots.org](mailto:chester.county.pa@toysfortots.org)

## Coordinator Responsibility #2: Getting some help

In parallel with getting your warehouse, you should be getting some volunteers. You're mostly going to need them in December, but there are plenty of things that can be delegated earlier in the season, such as dropping off Toy Drop Boxes and posters.

Where can you get help?

- Your friends. If you don't have any, your spouse's friends.
- Assuming you have one, any Marine Corps League detachments in your service area
- High Schools (many kids need service hours)
- Boy / Girl Scouts
- Large businesses, who may want to have a 'day of service' along with donating toys
- The Agencies that are working with you. Some are happy to put in some sweat, given how much assistance you're offering to them

When it comes to volunteers, keep in mind if they are working under your authority, they also represent Toys for Tots. You should therefore be leery of requesting volunteers from organizations where accepting their help may decrease the willingness of other people to work with you. Best example here would be political parties: members of parties, even office holders, are welcome to volunteer *\*in their personal capacity\** with my campaign, but they are *\*never\** permitted to do something that makes it appear that the Toys for Tots Foundation is 'taking sides' in a political contest. The Office of Representative John Smith is a fine drop spot, if the same offer is given to other officeholders. The campaign headquarters for John Smith for Congress, not so much

Your volunteers are one of the most critical parts of your campaign, you *\*cannot\** do this alone. Keep them informed so they know what needs to be done and can offer to help. The more volunteers you have, the easier it is to fill volunteer slots, so always be open to new ones.

I keep a Google Sheet to track my volunteers. There are other methods as well. This is used as a general update email list, so even people who are not necessarily interested in volunteering are added. Updates go out often enough to keep people informed, even if there isn't an active ask of their time. Keeping your volunteers in the loop makes them more invested in the program and more willing to step up when

help \*is\* needed, rather than as a response to a blind email asking for bodies out of the blue in December.

## Coordinator Responsibility #3: Getting some Toys

This is going to be long and rambling, because some of these Lessons Learned don't necessarily follow neatly in sequence

The primary source of toys and gifts will be donations from the community. That's why we have all those big nifty white boxes, which (hopefully) will be filled by your community

In case it isn't obvious, your best sources of donations will not line up with the areas of greatest need. This makes sense – if people have the extra funds necessary to donate, they wouldn't need to apply to the program – and if there are a large number of people applying to the program, there are fewer people available to donate.

That being said, there may be a point where it doesn't make sense to add another drop site – you already have several sites in close proximity; the site has historically not supplied a large number of donations, or the business is not one that you wish to be associated with Toys for Tots. As Coordinator, it is your call which sites you support – you are not \*obligated\* to support a drop site if it does not conform with your plans

In general, I try to spread my donation locations around, so there's always a convenient box available for someone to drop something off. Here's my 2023 priority outreach list

- 2022 drop sites. (duh)
  - Some are not available, a couple ended up being less than ideal partners and are not proactively contacted
  - We can't assume that a business is willing to be a drop site again; we need an explicit buy in, so we have a contact who will help when it comes time to pick stuff up (see below)
- School Districts
  - Schools can be both a source of gifts and offer an opportunity to assist those within the school who need assistance. More details on that later in the document

- Setting up a ‘friendly rivalry’ between school districts may be effective, but this must be done carefully so that those districts who do not have a base of support that would allow them to ‘compete’ with the higher income districts do not feel disrespected or insulted. It may be better to set up a base year and then have them compete against the donation they collected previous year.
- Municipal buildings
  - Some will be interested, some will not – but this helps ensure there is coverage across your region
- Emergency Services (Fire department / Police department)
- The largest employers in your region
- Toy / book stores
  - Not only are these more likely to have gifts for your children, building relationships can help with purchases later in the year, possibly at a discount
- Libraries
- Car dealerships
- Any national Sponsors – some will not be interested in an onsite drive, some will

Here is the general policy I follow for getting sites signed up

1. Get sites to sign up

For my campaign, I exclusively have sites that are tracked via my Foundation site, and mostly request self service from them. I direct them to this location and ask them to sign up:

<https://chester-county-pa.toysfortots.org/local-coordinator-sites/lco-sites/local-toy-drop-form.aspx>

2. Make them commit to what they’re agreeing to do

It is important to set expectations and understand the constraints that a Drop Site may face before accepting them as a Drop Site. For those that are holding internal-only drive, you will not want to place them on your website. You will want to verify what supplies they are looking for, and what date they intend to begin collecting – for public sites, they should not be displayed on your site until they are live.

You will also want to set expectations on when the last collection date is, and any other constraints that exist with your pick up plan – reaching out in December and finding out there were misunderstandings on the plan does not help your program, and does not encourage the site to work with you next year

3. Get them supplies

Once you've determined they're willing to work with you, you will need to get them the supplies they need. Some sites will have retained their boxes and such from the previous year, and will not need anything. Other sites will need to either have supplies dropped off, or will need to travel to your warehouse to pick them up.

For 2023, I will be setting up 'supply sites' – locations where drop sites can travel to pick up supplies that is not my warehouse, hoping to cut down on the number of trips the volunteers will need to do.

One of the items on the SOP is that every drop box must have contact information for the campaign associated with that box. I use this opportunity to let people know what our greatest needs are and push my virtual giving campaigns, because gifts that are delivered on a pallet are a lot easier to deal with than dragging everything back to the Warehouse.

[2022 PACHST Toy Drop sign.docx](#)

#### 4. Keep in touch

Just as I will reach out to my volunteers throughout the season, I will reach out to the drop sites as well. I will remind them that we are here to support them, see if they need a pick up of a full bin, give them updates on the forecasted needs of the program, let them know of events or fundraisers near their business, as well as other important details.

While you certainly don't want to waste anyone's time with these emails, half of the point is making sure they remember that Toys for Tots is serving their community, and that you appreciate their assistance. Without their support the program is next to impossible to complete – acting in a way that ensures they 'feel the love' reduces the number of sites that either choose not to participate or just phone it in the next year

**You will not get an even mix of ages in collections.** The majority of the items donated by the community are \*toys\* - things that can be found on the toy aisle of Target or Walmart. That's great, those are super valuable, but what you are going to rapidly discover is that you have far more of the 3-5 age range than anything else.

This is what I was left with at the end of 2021 - \*after\* spending a considerable amount of money on toys in the 0-2 and 8+ rangers. Most of what is left in those areas were late donations or items that were not picked up

Age	Toys - Boy	Toys - Girl	Toys - Any	Total
0 to 2	68	89	71	228
3 to 5	1307	697	86	2090
6 to 7	280	248		528
8 to 10	123	97	16	236
11+	77	292	18	387

This leaves you with a problem if you're trying to assist older children – which is where the next items come in

### On Virtual Toy Drives

Along with toys collected directly from the public, some businesses - especially those that have moved to a hybrid or fully remote workforce - will seek other ways to support Toys for Tots. Often this is via monetary donations, but many are looking for tangible gifts to offer. This is where a virtual toy drive can come in handy - a business or their employees can buy gifts online, and they are shipped directly to Toys for Tots.

As of 2022 I have two virtual drives up – with You Give Goods and HDI. Both will ship via pallets all at once, so a steady stream of packages are not showing up at the warehouse at an inconvenient time

<https://yougivegoods.com/chestercountypa-toydrive2022>

<https://www.catalogmachine.com/hdi-wholesale/showroom/s/pachst>

HDI offers case packs, You Give Goods offers individual items, and allows for 'sub drives' for businesses, schools, etc

What's the value in a Virtual Drive?

- They can bundle all this stuff and ship it to you when you're ready, so you don't have to collect it
- You can modify the list to prioritize the stuff useful to your campaign, not necessarily what a donor would default to given unlimited options
- Places can participate with a mostly remote workforce
- You can encourage friendly competition between businesses, school districts, etc.
- If your community doesn't have many sources of toys, this is an option for them

I put the QR codes on the signs I put on my toy drop boxes (see #3, above), modified if the business has a different virtual drive – one specific for them, or the online store of a toy store, etc

### **On Supplemental toys**

Unless you have a whole bunch of money, or a whole lot of toys, the Foundation will be sending out Supplemental Toys. These are (mostly) things that have been donated to the Foundation – they break the loads up and distribute out to the campaigns based on the number of children they are forecast to assist.

That's the First Supplemental, and it's incredibly helpful, as it is focused on the youngest and oldest age ranges. The thing to keep in mind is that you're going to get cases of the same thing, so finding a way to make sure every kid in the house doesn't get the same thing is important during distribution. See more in that section

### **Buying: Dos and Don'ts**

Assuming you have the funds, you will likely need to buy some toys at some point

- Don't buy stuff that you will get donations for

I never buy 'regular' toys – toys that are geared towards the ages of 3-8. Invariably, these make up the bulk of what are donated, and I end up with an overstock. No matter how cool the toy, no matter how cheap the price, you need to focus on the toys you \*won't collect\*, not the age ranges where you will likely have something

- Don't pay retail if you can avoid it
  - Group Sales, HDI, and other Foundation-approved vendors can offer gifts at a discount
  - If you've made nicey nice with your local Toys stores, they will often offer a discount when purchases are made in bulk
- Don't pay tax if you can avoid it
  - Toys for Tots is a 501 (c)(3) charity, many states offer a tax exemption
  - Talk to your Accounting Specialist if you aren't sure
- Don't just buy 'toys' for older kids
  - Although the program is called "Toys for Tots", there are often other gifts that are appropriate for older children. Headphones, personal grooming items, cosmetics, art kits – there are plenty of gifts that can be found for the teenagers that wouldn't normally be considered 'toys', but are perfectly acceptable holiday gifts
- Keep a reserve of funds for distribution

- While one can hope to receive donations for many supplies, this cannot be guaranteed. Trucks may need to be rented, bags... sorry, "Christmas Joy Collection Containers" may need to be bought, gas reimbursed for volunteers. Not being able to effectively distribute the toys you have purchased because you've used up your funds is an Ungood Situation

## Coordinator Responsibility #4: Finding out who needs toys

Determining who will receive the gifts that are gathered by your campaign is another area where campaigns can vary greatly. Many work exclusively through agencies, while others accept family applications as well. Some place limits on the ages they can support. There are tradeoffs involved in any method that is chosen – you can only do the best you can do

### Family Applications:

The Chester County Campaign requires that all applications be placed online. This is the only way we can serve the number of families we do, but the tradeoff here is that people without reliable internet access don't have the ability to apply. We try to work with agencies that can assist those people when possible, but there isn't an easy way around this with the resources available to us

Applications from outside our coverage area are either transferred (when a receiving campaign is willing to accept them) or disapproved (when the campaign the family is associated with does not accept family applications submitted online).

Some campaigns place eligibility requirements on their families. Besides ensuring they live in our coverage area, we generally do not – but if your campaign does, remember that the Foundation SOP is pretty explicit on what you *cannot* do: 6.15(b) “**campaign Coordinators are not authorized to request documents proving citizenship (a passport), or store any personal identifiable information (PII)**” . Campaigns can request PII to validate that children are in the custody of the applying parent or guardian; they cannot, under any circumstances, retain copies of those documents, or any information from them.

In the view of the Chester County campaign, the credo from the training trumps the risk of fraud: “we are not the toy police”. Allowing an occasional scam artist to collect a handful of low value toys is an acceptable risk if the alternative is to potentially turn away people in need.

That's not to say that some validation is not necessarily in order. Families with large numbers of reported children receive an additional level of scrutiny, and this has unfortunately demonstrated the need for that exercise - but in general, it's not a good use of anyone's time

There is a Duplicate Family Request Finder tool on the website; this can be used to locate and remove duplicate applications, which can be more art than science. As the number of applications grows closer to the cutoff, it is an invaluable tool for making sure you're not approving duplicate applications.

## Agency Applications

While we help hundreds of families, we do not have anywhere near enough volunteers to support all the people needing support. To cover that gap, we work with nonprofit agencies.

Nonprofits will fill out an application, just like families, but they will receive gifts in bulk for the children they support

For our campaign, we have two types of agency partners: Family agencies, that are meeting the need of a specific set of known families, and community agencies, that don't necessarily have specific families in mind when they make their requests.

Family Agencies take precedence over Community Agencies, but must offer some type of validation to ensure families aren't - inadvertently or not - getting support from a Community Agency and Toys for Tots directly, as well as some other checks:

- Confirm they have the explicit consent of the custodial parent or guardian
- Describe their pre-registration process
- Serve our community, not a larger area. If a larger area, they will need to discuss to make sure they are getting gifts from one, and only one, campaign

It is important to make sure an agency is legitimate before approving their application. This is the process I usually follow:

- Check their 501c3 number with the IRS and Charity Navigator
  - <https://apps.irs.gov/app/eos/>
  - <https://www.charitynavigator.org/>
- Check that the mailing address supplied is legitimate - not a home, not a building that has no reference to them
  - There are isolated cases where a legitimate org can have a residential mailing address, but this is a red flag
- See what evidence there is that they have supported their community. Merely existing doesn't mean they have a focus that is compatible with ours
  - Usually an org that is just offering a "gift giveaway" isn't necessarily targeting the families that most need support. It's a balancing act between judging how an org chooses to offer support and making sure that Toys for Tots is not just being used to support PR activities that offer minimal help to families
  - The orgs website, Facebook, and googling their name are important

Agencies can often offer volunteer assistance. Under no circumstances can volunteers from an Agency be involved in packing their own order

## Coordinator Responsibility #5: Getting Toys into Hands

- Pickup weekend
  - hubs
- Sorting
  - 'Gift' definition
  - Stocking stuffer bags
  - On random nongift crap
- Distribution
  - Bags vs 'shopping'
  - On bikes and other big ticket items
  - How to deal with the inevitable issues
  - Remote sites

## **Coordinator Responsibility #6: Getting ready for next year**

- Clean up the warehouse
- Store what you gotta store
- After Action Report

## Other things: Soliciting Donations / Fundraising

### Donated supplies

The stuff you need:

- Contractor Trash Bags aka “Christmas Joy Collection Container”
- Boxes, packing tape
- Dollies and – if you’re lucky enough to have a loading dock – a pallet jack
- Trucks during pickup weekend
- Munchies and water for your volunteers
- Printer paper for pick sheets; labels for stocking stuffer bags

Foundation support levels

Give them all the credit you can

### Fundraising

At the end of the day, fundraising can be critical, because you are going to need to buy gifts to supplement donations

Keep in mind that the farther out from Christmas you are, the harder it is to get attention – but of course the closer to get to Christmas, the more you need to focus on, you know, distributing a jillion toys

Examples:

- Golf tourney
- Trivia night
- T shirts