

Golden Angel Tree brings holiday joy to seniors in Salt Lake City care homes

The Golden Angel Tree program brings Christmas gifts to seniors in care homes across Salt Lake City.

Of course, the tradition of waking up to find presents beneath a twinkling tree on Christmas morning adds to the magic and joy of the holiday season.

For hundreds of seniors in care homes across Salt Lake City, [The Salvation Army Golden Angel Tree](#) program brings the same excitement, ensuring they receive thoughtful gifts and experience the warmth and generosity of Christmas.



The Salvation Army Angel Tree program has brought gifts to children across the U.S. since 1979. Angel tags are placed on Christmas trees in public spaces, where donors can select a tag and shop for a child. The Golden Angel tree operates in a similar way using the same trees.

“The Golden Angel Tree is a wonderful way to ensure that seniors who may not have family to support them at Christmas still receive a gift and experience some of that holiday joy,” said Lt. Kate Combs, Salt Lake City Corps Officer.

Over a decade ago, Salt Lake City expanded the Angel Tree program to include seniors in care homes. In 2023, around 1,400 seniors from 20 care homes received gifts.

Among the recipients was Nancy Jensen, a resident of Pine Creek Rehabilitation and Nursing. She said waking up to gifts on Christmas was a pleasant surprise.

“It’s a beautiful way for the community to come together to make sure that everyone feels cared for and loved around the holidays.”

Whitney Mascaro, Recreation Therapy Director

“I don’t have family around so I don’t expect to get much of anything for Christmas,” she said.

Last year, Jensen received a blanket and a pajama set. This year, she wished for slippers and a calendar.

“It’s a nice feeling to know others are thinking about you,” she said.

Combs said seniors who have outlived their families or live far away from them are the most common recipients—and that’s why they focus on seniors in care homes.

“Extending support to seniors is significant,” Combs said. “It’s important that they can still [participate in those special Christmas traditions.](#)”

Combs said shopping for Golden Angel Tree has become popular in the community, as senior wish lists often feature practical items—most ask for clothing, pajama sets, socks, blankets, board games and personal care items.

“It seems to touch donors’ hearts in a special way as they help seniors who are requesting such simple gifts,” she said.

After donors drop off the gifts, Combs said she and her husband, fellow Salt Lake City Corps Officer Captain James Combs, set up a time and location for the care homes to collect them. Facilitators then distribute the gifts on Christmas.

Pine Creek Rehabilitation Recreation Director Phil Hansen works with residents to help them create their wish lists. When the gifts arrive in December, he wraps and labels each one.

Residents then gather on Christmas morning to open gifts as a group.

“It seems to grow every year,” Hansen said. “In our first year, around 13 seniors benefitted; last year, we reached 25.”



Residents of Pine Creek Rehabilitation and Nursing in Salt Lake City open gifts on Christmas morning. Courtesy Pine Creek Rehabilitation and Nursing.

Hansen said each year he takes a moment to tell recipients where the gifts came from and how The Salvation Army made it happen.

“Everyone is so appreciative; you can just see it on their faces,” Hansen said. “They just say how grateful they are that a stranger went out of their way to shop for them.”

At Draper Rehabilitation and Care Center, some 35 residents are gift recipients.

Recreation Therapy Director Whitney Mascaro said the location began participating in the Golden Angel Tree program 10 years ago when a retired Salvation Army officer became a long-term resident.

“She had some health problems so she ended up living here,” Mascaro said. “She didn’t have family around so other Salvation Army officers would come and visit her.”

Over time, she said the visiting Salvation Army officers began bringing Christmas gifts to residents. Eventually, they expanded this effort into the Golden Angel Tree program to ensure more seniors received Christmas gifts.

Now, Draper Rehabilitation and Care Center receives 60-80 donated gifts from the community each Christmas season.

Mascaro said anticipation builds among residents as she places the wrapped gifts beneath Christmas trees—the festive decorations help get everyone into the holiday spirit.

“Everyone is just so happy,” she said. “It’s a beautiful way for the community to come together to make sure that everyone [feels cared for and loved around the holidays.](#)”

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