

## How the ‘Chief’s Camp Challenge’ boosted youth camp attendance in the West

**Summer camp attendance in the Western Territory increased in 2024 thanks to a challenge from the Chief Secretary.**

Studies support what The Salvation Army has known all along—the [power of a positive camp experience](#) to transform a child’s life.

“Spending a week at camp can change a child’s life in amazing ways,” said Western Territorial Youth Secretary Major Emmanuel Masango.



In 2024, the Youth Department issued the “Chief’s Camp Challenge”—endorsed by Chief Secretary Colonel Eddie Vincent—aiming to boost the number of youth attending a week at one of the West’s 11 summer camps.

“It’s no secret that camper attendance has dipped post-pandemic,” Vincent wrote in the challenge announcement. “This is a great concern of mine. We need to get more kids to camp this summer.”



Photo courtesy Esther Hsu.

The challenge was structured to give every Salvation Army corps location—regardless of size—a fair opportunity to win. To earn entries, each corps needed to complete five steps: register for the challenge (1 entry), send a child to camp (5 entries), meet its camper attendance goal set by the division based on corps size (15 entries), have camp staff hired from the corps (1 entry per staff member), and host an event in September for all campers who attended (15 entries).

The grand prize—valued at \$15,000—was designated to fund a corps retreat weekend or other activities that support youth programs. Second prize awarded \$2,000 for special youth group outings, while the third prize provided \$1,000 to help cover registration fees for divisional youth retreats.

The result? Many corps locations across the territory embraced the challenge, Masango said, with about 300 more campers in 2024 compared to the year prior. Overall, almost 4,500 children attended camp in 2024 across the western U.S.

“While there were prizes with dollar values, every child who attended camp won something from experiencing a week full of fun creating lasting memories, and experiencing the love of Jesus,” Masango said. “Many camps reported first-time commitments and recommitments to Jesus among campers. This is an excellent win that you cannot put a monetary value on.”

The winners, announced Oct. 2, 2024—all in California—were the Oakland Chinatown Corps, first place; Ridgecrest Corps, second place; and Santa Monica Corps, third place.

Oakland Chinatown Corps Officers Majors Esther and Timothy Hsu used some of the prize money to send youth to the Del Oro Divisional Youth Retreat in March. Last year, only two teens attended from the corps. This year, they sent 20.

“While there were prizes with dollar values, every child who attended camp won something from experiencing a week full of fun creating lasting memories, and experiencing the love of Jesus.”

*Major Emmanuel Masango*

“For those teens who volunteer six hours every Sunday, this was not only a reward and recognition, but also an opportunity—beyond just our own site—to connect with other young people from [the division] and to get to know The Salvation Army better,” Esther Hsu said.

When they returned home, the impact was evident.

“I like how engaging and exciting the worships were and seeing how worship can adapt to a new generation of expression,” said Miaoying, 18. “I like how not only was our youth leadership group able to bond together and develop deeper relationships with each other, but also how everyone could get a chance to learn more about God and Jesus.”

Eighteen-year-old Vanessa said it was her first time camping since her arrival in the U.S.

“I can feel me and our team members being closer and closer,” she said. “But most importantly, it made me want to know Jesus more.”

Recently, the corps used some of the remaining funds for a celebration. Typically, only the youth are at the corps on Sunday afternoons for music classes and activities such as chess, badminton, ping-pong, board games and reading. But for Mother’s Day, May 11, the corps invited the parents to join the Sunday afternoon activities, creating a time for families to come together and have fun.

“This was especially meaningful since parents are usually busy with work and rarely have time to play together as a family,” Hsu said. “To end the day, each family made ice cream together. This year’s Mother’s Day was a truly joyful experience for every student and their family.”



Photo courtesy Esther Hsu.

Ridgecrest Corps Officers Captains Chris and Gina Noble are stretching their second-place prize money, funding regular outings for the kids, notably on First Fridays, when they might go bowling or to an ice cream parlor. One of their first outings, during the Christmas holiday, was to The North Pole at Ridgecrest, a local tradition.

“If you want to grow your faith, grow your fun—and then throw in some food,” Gina Noble said. “And of course, we talk about faith and pray over them.”

Noble said camp gives many of the kids a week away from what may not be an ideal home situation.

“You rescue the child for a week [at camp], and then you [keep in touch with them](#), and then take them out on First Fridays,” she said.

She added that at camp, they see other teens serving.

“Then when they come back from camp, they want to do more in the community—and the community sees the impact,” she said.

The Ridgecrest community has responded, donating more toward camp scholarships than during the annual Red Kettle Campaign.

“Teenagers have such impact,” Noble said.

The Western Territory aims to build on this positive impact with the May launch of the 2025 Chief’s Camp Challenge, which features similar guidelines and rewards. Winners will be announced during a live-stream in September.

“Camp ministry is an essential part of our mission, and it’s important that we continue to support camps across the territory,” Vincent said. “Join us in creating unforgettable summer camp experiences for our youth and community.”

### **Do Good:**

- It’s because of people like you that The Salvation Army can serve more than 27 million Americans in need each year. Your gift helps fight for good all year in your community. It’s an effort to build well-being for all of us, so together we rise—and that good starts with you. [Give to spread hope](#) with a donation of funds, goods or time today.