



Friends of SoZo Kids Inc.

2024 Annual Report

Thanks to Friends Like You

Our mission is to **connect the time, talent, and treasures** of residents of The Villages and surrounding communities to **meet the basic, educational, and emergency needs** of children and their families living in poverty in the Ocala National Forest. We are an all-volunteer organization and 95% of funds received are used to benefit the SoZo Kids we serve. 2024 was a very successful year and we want to detail the many ways in which they benefited from our work together.

Meeting Basic Needs

Back-to-School Bash (Sneakers, Clothing, Underwear, Socks, Toiletry/Hygiene Items)

The 2024 Back-To-School Bash, put on by the staff of the Help Agency of the Forest (aka SoZo Kids) together with our volunteers and much of our donated goods, was a highwater mark for the annual event. Instead of 1,000 kids showing up, there were 1,500 - and we had a lot to give away. Friends like you helped provide 1,150 backpacks filled with grade-specific items for elementary and middle school SoZo Kids, including earphones, ear buds, and scientific calculators. This year we expanded our high school efforts. Not only did we buy 400 backpacks that were filled with supplies by other organizations, but we also added additional supplies ourselves.

There were plenty of sneakers and clothing items at the Bash thanks to our donors and Vans Shoes, who donated or deeply discounted 1,200 pairs of new sneakers and gave us \$25,000 of new clothing. And it was all high quality merchandise. Together with donors like you who purchased sneakers or sent money, we collected an astonishing 2,760 pairs of sneakers - as much as the last two years combined! We also had 1,000 packs of underwear/bras, over 10,000 pairs of pairs of socks, and hundreds of toiletry/hygiene items. Those SoZo Kids had everything they needed to start the school year looking good and feeling great! And not even the rain that August day could deter the volunteers from sizing/fitting sneakers, painting girls nails, and giving haircuts!

Christmas Angels Project

Christmas Wish Lists for over 200 SoZo Kids were filled through our Christmas Angels Project, plus over 100 special gifts were purchased (e.g. ear buds, razor scooters, soccer balls). Two collection days allowed donors and volunteers to be part of the festivities to ensure the gift bundles were ready for Santa!

Holiday Meals

Thanks to generous donors like you and a Matching Gift campaign we were able to 'go big' on Holiday Meals! We provided the Help Agency with \$23,000 of turkeys and hams and enough meal boxes for almost 1,000 individual people. Those are all record numbers by far, and are a shining example of how your generosity helped an amazing number of SoZo Kids and their families have a great holiday.

Meeting Educational Needs

Post-Secondary Career/Education Award Program

This program assists SoZo high school graduates seeking higher education or a trade by purchasing much needed items not covered by traditional assistance such as scholarships. This year we helped two young women and a young man by buying nursing books, a laptop computer, and a computer tablet.

After-School Educational Program

Our volunteers assist the staff of the Help Agency of the Forest (aka SoZo Kids) with the kids' activities, including educational modules. We continued to promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) at both offsite After-School locations through our Robotics program and other STEM 'play packs' involving gears, circuit boards, Legos, magnets, etc. Studies have shown early exposure to STEM can be an important step for those later interested in a technology career. Our volunteers also encouraged reading, including giving away books, and taught sessions on handling money, making good choices, and some history. These activities target SoZo Kids in grades K-5 who are the dominant attendees.

After-School/Summer Program Nutritious Meals

Unfortunately, many SoZo Kids do not have dinner when they get home, compounding hunger insecurity with learning issues. Donor and volunteer support from Friends like you provided over 8,000 nutritious cafeteria-style meals, an increase from 2023 due to higher enrollment. Our volunteers also helped with serving and clean-up. Some volunteers, like the Men's Christian Study Group, did on-site grilling! In addition, we also make 'meal packages' to send home with the kids for their siblings, as well as the parents.

Camp SoZo Program

Last year the Help Agency had to use temporary facilities for their Summer Camp, incurring a lot of additional rental expenses. They were still able to provide 180 SoZo Kids with the opportunity to participate in a three-day/two-night camp experience, and your donations provided the camp fees for all those kids. This program offers a healthful escape from the poverty in the Forest and offers fun activities for all, as well as leadership training for the older kids. Many SoZo Kids 'alumni' come back as counselors for the camp.

Little League Program

The Help Agency staff is also involved in the Babe Ruth Little League program in the forest. In 2024 we provided money for them to pay the league fees for 40 SoZo Kids. This is a great opportunity for them to make new friends and develop teamwork and leadership skills.

Meeting Emergency/Immediate Needs

Grants Awarded to the Help Agency of the Forest

Because of your financial generosity, Friends of SoZo Kids provided almost \$100,000 in grants to the Help Agency. These checks were used for a wide variety of needs, including transportation repairs and fuel, supplies, storage costs, playground improvements and supplies at the After-School sites, and various other improvements. These grants significantly improved the infrastructure and facilities for the Kids and volunteers.

Fundraisers

Back when Friends of SoZo Kids was a Lifestyle Club in the 2010's, the golf tournament was a staple for fundraising. This year that tradition was revived as we held a Friends of SoZo Kids Golf Tournament on October 19 at Baseline Golf Course in Ocala. Together with the Men's Christian Study Group who solicited donors and handled most of the tourney setup and operation, it raised over \$25,000 - plus a donated new golf cart to replace the Help Agency's old one used at their compound. We hope to continue this in 2025.

Thank You for Being a Friend of SoZo Kids!

We invite you to review our 2023 IRS-Form 990 on the website at www.FriendsOfSoZoKids.com
Our 2024 IRS-Form 990 will be filed by May 15, 2025.