



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **ANNUAL HOLIDAY EFFORTS BENEFIT FAYETTE COUNTY CHILDREN**

**Uniontown, PA** – This holiday season, Fayette County Children and Youth Services is especially thankful for its ongoing community support.

This week, CYS launched its annual Stuff-A-Sleigh and sponsorship campaigns, which aim to ensure Fayette County children receive Christmas gifts.

“Christmas is a special time of year for everybody, but especially this year during the pandemic,” CYS Case Aide III Reba Stramat said. “It’s been a hard year for all of us, but it just keeps getting harder on our CYS families. Something as small as donating a gift for one of these kids can make a huge difference.”

CYS began delivering Christmas gifts to children in the foster care system more than 30 years ago. Today, the campaign has expanded to include all CYS children involved with the agency at any level, and gifts for children ages 0 to 18 are accepted.

“A lot of our families struggle financially; some are in the throes of addiction or mental health concerns,” CYS Administrator Gina D’Auria said. “For those children affected, especially those who have been removed from their biological families and put into situations that are new and different, something as simple as a Christmas gift can really brighten up their entire season.”

Starting in October, various Fayette County businesses, churches, public service organizations, area citizens and county employees coordinate with CYS to purchase gifts for every last child. Last year, Stramat said, the community’s efforts allowed CYS to help more than 400 kids.

“We were concerned about not having as much help this year due to the COVID crisis, but we’re trying a lot of new avenues, and the support has been overwhelming,” Stramat said. “We’ve really had to think outside the box.”

The Fayette County Courthouse participates in a traditional way each year, by establishing an Angel Tree. Its concept is simple:

- Several dozen children in CYS services have their first names, ages and three wish-list gifts listed on a printed tag.
- Those tags are hung on a Christmas tree placed in the courthouse beginning in November.
- Anyone may take a tag, report their selection to the Human Resources department, and purchase any or all of the gifts listed on the tag.
- Participants wrap their gifts and attach the tag to the package, before returning them to Human Resources for safe-keeping until Christmas.

While each participating organization has its own method, the Angel Tree has been particularly successful, due to its popularity among county employees. Within six hours of the tree being placed in the courthouse, 75 percent of its tags were claimed.

Last year, the Stuff-A-Sleigh campaign - spearheaded by Stramat - was created to supplement the agency's efforts in the unlikely event that not all of the children were selected for sponsorship. The large wooden sleigh was built for CYS by Fayette County resident Mike Shaffer, husband of CYS Supervisor Jayme Shaffer, and can hold dozens of toys at one time.

The sleigh allows the agency to quickly add to the sponsorship list all the way through Christmas, as new children become involved with the agency every day.

Only new, unwrapped gifts for children ages 0 through 18 are to be placed in the sleigh. All gifts donated will be distributed to Fayette County children.

"Last year, we filled that sleigh over 10 times," D'Auria said. "It just always feels like it works out somehow; like every child receives their gifts. It's like somebody's watching over us to make sure we get what we need."

Ford of Uniontown employees have already filled the sleigh once this season, despite the campaign just starting.

CYS has partnered with Pickle FM Radio to promote the Stuff-A-Sleigh campaign, which culminates in a daylong event at Uniontown Walmart. On Tuesday, Dec. 8, CYS and Pickle volunteers will be stationed outside the store from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., along with the sleigh and special guest: Santa Claus!

Anyone interested in participating in CYS' campaigns this holiday season can do so by:

- Visiting Fayette County CYS during operating hours through Dec. 11 to donate a new, unwrapped gift.
- Stopping by the Stuff-A-Sleigh Christmas Gift Drive at Walmart, Dec. 8.
- Donating a gift card or cash to the CYS office or during the gift drive, which can be used by employees to purchase gifts for the sleigh; saved for last-minute additions to the sponsorship list; or designated for a specific child in CYS care.
- Visiting the Fayette County Courthouse to select a tag from the Angel Tree, located outside the Human Resources Office, and return a wrapped gift for the child by Dec. 4.
- Calling CYS Supervisor Traci Mari at 724-430-1283; to sponsor a specific child or learn more about the sponsorship program, including how to ship online gift orders directly to CYS.
- Calling Reba Stramat at 724-425-5417 to learn more about contributing to the Stuff-A-Sleigh campaign.

"People who aren't comfortable going to a store to shop this year but who still want to help have the option to support us through the mail," Stramat said. "There's more goodness than bad in Fayette County. People are willing to give and give and give any way they can, and it's wonderful to see. That's why it's called 'the reason for the season.'"

D'Auria said both initiatives are "very touching," because she enjoys seeing not only the children's excitement, but the pure joy of her staff and all those who support the cause.

"It really shows us how strong our community can be. If it wasn't for the generosity of our Fayette County citizens, we wouldn't be able to make this happen every year," D'Auria said. "I was born and

raised in Fayette County, and sometimes you hear some negatives, but this is the positive. This is where we really see our community come together; putting aside any personal barriers and really working for the good of the kids. It's a lot to be thankful for."

Fayette County Children and Youth Services is located at 130 Old New Salem Road in Uniontown. The Fayette County Courthouse is located at 22 East Main Street in Uniontown.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.FayetteCountyPA.org](http://www.FayetteCountyPA.org).

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