



Friends of SoZo Kids Inc.

2023 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. We join with FRIENDS like you to celebrate the many ways our beloved SoZo Kids have benefited from our work together in 2023.

Meeting Basic Needs

Christmas Angels Project

Christmas Wish Lists for 197 SoZo Kids plus 70 teen gifts (e.g. ear buds, razor scooters) and 60 general gifts (e.g. soccer balls, fishing equipment) were fulfilled through our Christmas Angels Project. Two collection days provided donors and volunteers the opportunity to be part of the festivities to ensure gift bundles were complete and ready for Santa's sleigh.

Holiday Meals

We provided the Help Agency with a grant to buy over 200 turkeys and 500 hams for SoZo Kids families. Your generosity provided thousands of meals for SoZo Kids and their families, making their holiday season special.

Back-to-School Bash

Friends like you helped provide 1,150 backpacks filled with all requested grade-specific items (this year we also bought over 1,500 earphones/ear buds for the students, and calculators for all middle school kids); also bought 400 backpacks that others filled with grade-specific items; 1,700 pairs of new sneakers (a record for us), over 500 packs of new underwear, and thousands of pairs of new socks to start the school year. All these items were distributed at the annual Back-to-School Bash on August 5, where 625 were personally fitted with shoes and received other needed items. Haircut and nail polishing stations completed the day. Because of Friends like you, SoZo Kids had everything they needed to start the school year looking good and feeling great!

Meeting Educational Needs

Generous volunteers and donors provided us with the opportunity to invest in multiple Educational Programs:

Post-Secondary Career/Education Award Program

Most SoZo Kids qualify for full tuition assistance because of their levels of poverty, but not material goods such as computers for college or tools for learning a trade. Through the Friends of SoZo Kids Career/Education Award Program, we help ensure the Kids have what they need to become successful, productive citizens with a living-wage job.

We had the pleasure of making one award to SoZo Kids in 2023. One student was provided textbooks for two semesters of college and gas money for commuting to college.

Camp SoZo Program

With your help, we provided 300 SoZo Kids (an increase of 100 over 2022) with the opportunity to participate in a three-night summer sleep-away camp experience at the Help Agency's Summer Camp. 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 SoZo Kids. Many SoZo Kids 'alumni' come back as counselors for the camp.

Little League Program

In 2023 we paid the Little League fees for over 50 SoZo Kids (from over 40 in 2022) so that they could participate in the Babe Ruth Little League program last year. This is a great opportunity for them to make new friends and develop teamwork and leadership skills.

Educational Program

Thanks to donors like you, FOSKI expanded its robotics program in 2023 at both of the Help Agency's After-School sites so that every SoZo Kid had their own robot to work with during the sessions. Studies have shown that introduction of a program like robotics at an early age can be an important step for those later interested in a STEM-related career (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math).

Kids from Kindergarten through middle school have benefited from a weekly video program to improve Math skills at Sandy Acres. FOSKI volunteers also added some fun educational sessions to supplement those of the Help Agency at their After-School and Summer Programs. Topics included math games, story reading, and teaching the kids how to count money to thriftily manage spending. Contacts were made with a Goodwill book donation program that provides free reading books (over 100 books a month) for the kids in After-School programs. Other activities included a presentation on Stranger Danger from a local Sheriff's Department and field trips for Summer Campers.

Nutritious Meals for After-School and Summer Programs

Unfortunately, many SoZo Kids don't enjoy dinner when they get home, compounding hunger insecurity and learning issues. Donor and volunteer support from Friends like you allowed us to provide nutritious cafeteria-style meals at each of the Help Agency's After-School and Summer Program days during the year, with over 7,000 kids meals prepared and served during 2023. In addition, 'meal packages' were sent home with kids to ensure prepared food for siblings.

Meeting Emergency/Immediate Needs

Grants Awarded to the Help Agency of the Forest

Because of your financial generosity, Friends of SoZo Kids was able to provide over \$150,000 in grants to the Help Agency of the Forest (aka SoZo Kids) for Basic, Educational, and Emergency Needs. These grants significantly improved facilities for the Kids and volunteers. A grant was awarded to purchase a used 14 passenger van and other transportation related expenses. Grants were made for Summer Camp upgrades (new mattresses) and multiple improvements and supplies for their After-School facilities at Sandy Acres and Forest Lake Park. Even without the van purchase, the amount of grants awarded in 2023 was greater than ever.

Thank You for Being a Friend of SoZo Kids!

**We invite you to review our 2022 IRS-Form 990 on the website at
www.FriendsOfSoZoKids.com**

Our 2023 IRS-Form 990 will be filed by May 15, 2024.