San Francisco Firefighters Toy Program streamlines donations with Fountain

Fountain enables the SF Firefighters Toy Program to simplify its application process so they can give more to those in need

97.5%

decrease in time to review
and approve applications
(from 20 minutes to
30 seconds)

Helped donate to nearly

30,000

children

The San Francisco Firefighters Toy Program, whose parent organization is the San Francisco Fire Fighters Union, Local 798, is the city's largest and the nation's oldest program of its kind. It began in 1949 with a few firefighters repairing broken toys and bikes for 15 families. Now, more than 300 firefighters and friends volunteer to distribute more than 200,000 toys to nearly 30,000 disadvantaged children year-round.

In addition to helping families in need, the Toy Program assists many community organizations such as the local San Francisco housing projects and pediatric units/cancer wards by donating to children who become displaced due to natural disasters.

The SF Firefighters Toy Program also places collection barrels at retail establishments, street fairs, and other locations. Event and Volunteer Coordinator Monique Wells and longtime volunteer Patty Coffee have been instrumental in the program's success.

Manual-intensive processes lead to hours of extra work

The SF Firefighters Toy Program has had a substantial impact on the city of San Francisco, and the organization needed a way to effectively manage its growing presence and activities, like processing applications to the program.

"Historically, the process has been extremely manual-intensive," said Coffee. "It required folks to go into their neighborhood firehouse, pick up a donation request application, and either drop it off or mail it in."

During the peak season—just before the winter holidays—the Toy Program team would spend countless hours reviewing applications, scheduling donation pick-up appointments, and validating applicant identification. Coffee, who handled the application process, would often have to work until one to two in the morning and then start again at 6:30 AM to manage the large volume of requests.

One of the program's major pain points was the inability of applicants to schedule and/or reschedule their appointments. Their previous system allowed the Toy Program team to send out appointments, but when applicants needed to adjust the time, it led to an influx of emails and calls asking to reschedule.

Manually confirming participants' identification became a huge lift for the team, too. The Toy Program currently only serves the San Francisco area, and the team needs to validate that each applicant lives in the right zip code and is the legal guardian of the children for whom they are requesting donations. The previous process required the team to verify identity in person, and with 300 to 500 families lining up outside, this would take hours.

"We have thousands of applicants that we serve per year and each applicant has multiple kids," said Wells. "So the system we used before was effective but extremely time-consuming."

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Enhanced efficiency powered by customization and automation

Wells had worked with Fountain Hire in her previous corporate job, and when she made the switch to the Toy Program, she knew Fountain's ability to handle high volumes of applications could be a game-changing solution for managing their needs. Fountain donated its hiring platform to the Toy Program team and helped them build a custom workflow to streamline their operations.

Before Fountain Hire, it would take Coffee and her team up to 20 minutes to review and approve a single applicant (if the application had no errors). Now, Fountain Hire handles the data collection for all applicants so the team only needs to confirm identification, which takes no more than 30 seconds. Even if some of the applications have issues, the team simply presses the "Recollect" button in the platform and the system automatically notifies the applicant they need to resubmit that piece of information.

"For the past 25 years, I have spent four or five hours in the morning at the Toy Program, and then I would come home and spend six, seven hours in front of the computer," said Coffee. "That is no longer my life and for that, I'm eternally grateful."

Because of the high volume of families they serve each year, having all communications live within Fountain Hire has improved how the team manages the massive amounts of applications. Fountain Hire's SMS capabilities enable families to text questions, making it easier for the team to track communications.

"The texting feature really is so helpful because [applicants] receive auto-generated texts and auto-generated emails," said Wells. "Then we're able to view [the messages] right in the Fountain applicant portal and respond to them as opposed to having to deal with the copious amount of phone calls and messages."

An easier journey for applicants

Not only has Fountain Hire helped the Toy Program team but the platform also has made the applicant experience smoother and faster. The Toy Program aims to serve as many children as possible, and part of that is making sure applicants can proceed through the process with ease.

"People have noticed the interface is so much easier for them," said Coffee. "And the difference is amazing."

Before Fountain Hire, the application was offered in English only, but now there is also a Spanish version, which helps make the program accessible for more families. Another pain point prior to Fountain Hire was the inability to get documentation approved before families came to pick up their donations. Many of the families do not have a personal vehicle and rely on public transportation, so it often takes them more time and coordination to visit the organization for approval. If they didn't have the right documents, they would have to leave and return at another time, which complicates the process.

"The pre-vetting of applications has saved us countless hours of time," said Wells. "Just the fact that we're able to see and gather the documentation before the applicants get here has completely changed the way that we handle operations here on a day-to-day basis."

One of the most impactful improvements for families is their newfound ability to choose when to pick up their donations and easily reschedule if they need to. For the Toy Program team, this has freed up significant time because they're no longer constantly rescheduling appointments. Now, they can focus on organizing and managing donations in a timely fashion.

"[Applicants] can self-schedule their own appointment when it's convenient for them," said Wells. "Once that's done, they are automatically pushed to the pick-up stage, at which point Patty and our volunteers can check them in really quickly, press 'Toys Received' [in the system], and it's done. It's very fast."

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Insights allow for regular improvements

Another issue the Toy Program faces every year is coming across duplicate applications, which can take donations from other families in need. Before Fountain Hire, the team would have to manually analyze the data to see who has applied more than once.

"We are able to serve a larger community now and distribute the toys more equally because it's not the same people who are applying over and over," said Wells. "Fountain pretty much just handles that problem for us, and [applicants] are only allowed to apply once."

Receiving financial support is crucial for the success of the organization. The Toy Program aims to continue growing and reaching more children, and having easy access to data significantly simplifies the process of obtaining support.

"We can extract the data that we need from any part in our operational process and have that readily available for whatever purposes we need, whether it be for taxes or whether it be to apply for grants," said Wells. "So that's extremely helpful and appreciated.

"Now that we have our applicant system that pretty much handles itself, we can focus on those other areas of growth," said Wells.

The future of giving

Wells, Coffee, and the rest of the Toy Program organization are passionate about providing families with donations, and having a customizable and automated applicant tracking system has transformed how they manage their operations.

"Fountain, I know, is the very best when it comes to handling applicants and dealing with applicants at scale, which we do during the toy season," said Wells. "And of course, we want the very best for ourselves and for this organization."

Wells plans to continue to use Fountain Hire going forward and is excited about using the platform to enhance their operations in other areas.

"Ideally, I just would like everything to go through Fountain—all the departments, everything," said Wells. "This has really changed the way we operate around here."