

# The FreeStore Story

**FreeStore**  
Helping Families  
Start Over



## Chair's Message

By Gloria Gray, Board Chair

It has been a very busy several months at the FreeStore! I pack dish boxes so I know. I watch Peg and her greeters helping clients choose what they need. Ellen packs pans and pots boxes and makes up laundry baskets with cleaning items. Bill and his crew test all the electronics and make furniture repairs as necessary. Dee and her crew sort linens and make up towel and sheet sets. Brian and Carol sort donations and get them where they need to be in the warehouse. Sally makes up silverware sets and Mary coordinates schedules for callers who want donations picked up. Mike coordinates all the truck

trips, Marty oversees the warehouse to make sure everything happens as planned, and Larry makes sure all your donations are used wisely. What is really beautiful is that all the people who work at the FreeStore are volunteers – about 120 of us. Thank you so much to all who make working for the FreeStore a regular part of your week. And donors, we truly could not do this without you. You're receiving this note because you've helped us before, and thanks again for that. There's a form at the bottom of this page that you can use to make a donation. If you'd prefer to go paperless, follow the "donate" tab at thefreestore.org.

## Those MidAmerican Volunteers

Sharon Steffen has something to say about **volunteers from the MidAmerican Energy Company**: "They're dynamite!" Three or four times a year, teams of company employees donate their time to the FreeStore. This spring, for example, they helped with a whole-house cleanout, and earlier they helped move several dozen couches that were donated by Drake University.

"They have the can-do spirit, they enjoy the work and they're so reliable," Steffen said. "When they say they'll have a certain number of people, that's the number that show up," said Steffen, the FreeStore's volunteer coordinator.

Talking about corporate assistance, **a team of Bankers Trust employees** received a company volunteer award this spring and plans to donate the \$2,500 prize toward child dresser kits, which the team will assemble.

Interested in getting your group involved with helping families start over? Contact Sharon at [sharon.f.steffen@gmail.com](mailto:sharon.f.steffen@gmail.com), or Kathy Frank at [kfrank1214@gmail.com](mailto:kfrank1214@gmail.com), or follow the "contact us" tab at thefreestore.org.



## Remembering Dick Bray

When the FreeStore was just starting to expand some 20 years ago, co-founder Harry Swanson told his longtime friend Dick Bray, founder of

Dick Bray Electrical Supplies of Des Moines, that the fledging charity needed \$5,000 to buy a used delivery truck. "He called me back and said, 'Swanson, you don't know

what you're talking about. You need 15k."

Bray and his wife Donna made the gift and made similar donations toward subsequent FreeStore trucks as well. Swanson said Bray liked seeing his name on FreeStore trucks. He quoted Bray as saying, "I know where my money goes when I see a truck going down the road with my name on it." Dick Bray died earlier this year. He was 87.

## Gently Used Goods

The FreeStore is constantly in need of gently-used furniture and household goods, things like couches, dining sets, small appliances, linens and dressers. Our clients receive these items for free (their advocates pay a small fee) and we'll pick up your donations at no cost. Call 515.282.3733 and leave a message. We'll call you back right away. Or drop off your donations at the warehouse at 841 11th St. on Tuesday, Friday or Saturday mornings.

## Spring 2025 FreeStore Gift

Please return this portion in the envelope provided to:  
**FreeStore, 1020 24th St.,  
West Des Moines, IA 50266.**

Your donations help pay for expenses such as warehouse rent, truck maintenance and fuel, furniture re-building supplies, and household supplies for clients.

**Yes! I want to help the FreeStore continue its work.**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

My Gift:  \$25  \$50  \$75  \$100  \$200  Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Information on the reverse side explains how the Birdies for Charity program matches up to 10 percent of your tax-deductible gift.

# Another Record Year

The torrid pace set in 2023 continued in 2024 for the FreeStore. A total of 536 Des Moines area families came to our warehouse last year and selected couches and beds and linens and dining room sets and kitchenware for their new homes, then watched as our volunteers delivered those goods within an hour. All at no cost to them. All clients are represented by advocate agencies or churches, which pay a small fee.

“Our 2024 total compares to a total of 514 families last year and there’s no sign of a slowdown,” said operations manager Marty Rathje. “The increased activity puts stress on volunteers, inventory, equipment and, most importantly, clients. Some clients have waited as long as three weeks to get an appointment to be served, even as we continue to add volunteers and delivery times.”

## FreeStore by the Numbers

	2024	2023	2022
<b>Total Families</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>395</b>
Adults	745	632	470
Children	830	753	482
<b>Domestic Violence Clients</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Estimated Value of Goods</b>	<b>\$694,000</b>	<b>\$643,000</b>	<b>\$620,000</b>
<b>Volunteer Hours</b>	<b>13,400</b>	<b>10,500</b>	<b>10,000</b>
<b>Paid Staff</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

The FreeStore helped 745 adults and 830 children last year, both significant increases driven in part by a large increase in the number of refugee families that settled in central Iowa. We also served 96 families recovering from domestic abuse situations. To meet the demand, the FreeStore increased the number of days that the warehouse is open for donation drop offs, recruited volunteer coordinators looking for corporate teams, rented additional warehouse space and remodeled the warehouse to make it warmer in winter and more welcoming year around.

As always, the FreeStore operates with zero paid employees and about 120 volunteers who reported more than 13,000 hours last year.

## John Kittrell – Volunteer of the Year

You’ll find John Kittrell at the FreeStore warehouse every Tuesday and Friday morning – and frequently other days as well – testing lamps, microwaves, crock pots, televisions, vacuum cleaners, and all other donated electronics that need to work properly before we offer them to clients. “Almost everything we receive is in good shape but it’s important to be sure. The people who receive these goods have enough on their plates without wondering if the vacuum cleaner works,” he said.

Kittrell, the latest FreeStore volunteer of the year, took on a new task last year –

reorganizing a section of the warehouse that is used for sorting, storing and rehabbing donated items. Volunteers now have easy and logical access to storage and sorting areas for linens, kitchenware and other donated household goods. The former general contractor (amid other careers), Kittrell says he enjoys the work but it’s the FreeStore mission – helping families start over – and the camaraderie of other volunteers that keeps him coming back. “What a joy to work here. I look forward to seeing all these people,” he said.



## No Salaries

The FreeStore’s expenses keep going up with one exception – paid staff. That’s because there is no paid staff and there never has been any paid staff in the 20-some year history of the charity. “Whenever I make presentations I get two questions,” said operations manager Marty Rathje. “They want to know how many clients we serve. I tell them the number keeps going up, some 530 families last year. Then they ask, how do you do that without paid staff? They’re incredulous. I’m incredulous as well.”

Part of the answer, he said, is that the charity works hard to recruit and retain more volunteers, and to constantly seek ways to make the work more efficient. Another part is that we pinch pennies. But the root answer, he said, is pride. “Our volunteers take a lot of pride in being part of an all-volunteer charity and they’re proud that a very high percentage of our revenue is used directly for clients,” he said.

About 88 percent of the FreeStore’s expenses go directly for client service.

Total expenses in 2024 were about \$221,000. That includes \$39,000 in warehouse improvements that were covered by specific grants. Of the remaining \$182,000 in operating expenses, the largest share was warehouse rent of about \$81,000. Next was about \$58,500 to cover gaps in donated goods. We buy dining room tables, kid dressers, bed frames, vacuum cleaners, and other goods for clients. There also were expenses for fuel and truck maintenance, office supplies and postage.

But the line item for salaries, as usual, was zero.

For specific expenses comparing the years 2022-2024, see the 2024 year-end review at [thefreestore.org](http://thefreestore.org).

## Birdies for Charity

Many charities in central Iowa, including the FreeStore, partner with the Principal Charity Classic Golf Tournament’s Birdies for Charity program. The FreeStore receives EVERY penny you donate. The Birdies program adds up to 10 percent to your gift (at no cost to you). For example, your \$100 becomes as much as \$110 to help families start over. Write your check to the FreeStore and mail it in the envelope provided.

Learn more at: [principalcharityclassic.com/charity/birdies-for-charity](http://principalcharityclassic.com/charity/birdies-for-charity)

