



AS IT IS

COVID-19 Limits 'Operation Santa Claus' in Alaska

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COVID-19 is changing the way Americans plan to celebrate the winter holidays this year. But, in Alaska, the National Guard found a way to carry out a beloved Christmas tradition for several distant Native American communities.

An Alaska National Guard helicopter recently landed on a frozen field in Stevens Village, home to about 30 people. Townspeople hurried to the landing field after seeing the helicopter land. They watched as the soldiers unloaded boxes containing gifts for almost everyone in the community.

Then the helicopter flew away.

The yearly National Guard gift transport known as "Operation Santa Claus," began in 1956. This year, the operation required some new safety measures.

"For 65 years we have not missed a beat," said Chief Winfield Hinkley, Jr., the Command Senior Enlisted Leader of the Alaska National Guard. He admitted that COVID-19 presented difficulty for Operation Santa Claus. But, he added, "it will not stop us from carrying out this tradition. It is an honor to do it."

In 1956, the remote Alaskan village of St. Mary's suffered periods of severe flooding and severe dryness. The townspeople faced a hard choice in the Christmas season: whether to provide food for St. Mary's or gifts for its children.

The town chose food.

Then, the Alaska Air National Guard stepped in. The service brought donated gifts and supplies to the community.

Since then, the program has grown. In 1969, The Salvation Army became a partner in providing playthings and more to children across rural Alaska.

Each year, Operation Santa Claus attempts to get gifts to two or three villages that are chosen for different reasons. One village might have had a special hardship during the year. Another might have high poverty levels.

Operation Santa Claus has provided for more than 90 villages since its beginning in St. Mary's. Stevens Village and two others, Birch Creek and Nanwalek, were chosen this year for the first time.

Volunteers packed playthings, **backpacks**, warm hats, teeth cleaning supplies and books for 127 children.

In a normal year, the arrival of Operation Santa Claus is a community event. People dress as the holiday **characters** Santa and Mrs. Claus, and their helpers. They celebrate with a party held at the local school building. All the townspeople are invited to have their photos taken with Santa and eat sweet treats. Gifts are handed out to children.

But this year, COVID-19 safety rules required that the gifts be left at the landing field.

Stevens Village First Chief David Kriska said having the National Guard choose the town was cheering.

“It was great because just being so locked down and with travel, you know, so out of touch with the outside world.”

However, Kriska wishes it could have been the full experience, including having his own children enjoy a visit with Santa.

He said, “It would have been great for my **kids** to **interact** with them because they're needing that social interaction. I would have loved to have that picture with my daughters.”

I'm Jonathan Evans.

Mark Thiessen reported on this story for the Associated Press. Jonathan Evans adapted this story for Learning English. Katy Weaver was the editor.

Words in This Story

backpacks – *n.* bags for carrying things that has two shoulder straps and is carried on the back

character – *n.* the personality or part which an actor recreates; a person in a story or play

interact – *v.* to talk or do things with other people

kids – *n.* children
