

The FreeStore Story



April 2019

A FreeStore Note

By Marty Rathje, Board Chair

The FreeStore has matured nicely over the years, graduating from a couple of garages and a handful of church volunteers to two warehouses and dozens of volunteers helping hundreds of families get a fresh start. To solidify our position and ensure our ability to meet future needs, we have launched a strategic plan and established some overall “areas of understanding.”

Let me share some of the highlights. We’ve decided that our primary clients will continue to be domestic abuse victims and others suffering from some form of trauma. Also unchanged – clients must be referred by our partner agencies in order for us to serve them. We also decided that for now, we’ll continue to focus only on Des Moines and the central Iowa area.

We will continue to be a completely volunteer organization. All of your gifts of time, money, and “gently used” household goods will continue to be used exclusively for our clients. In the years ahead we may need to revisit the issue of hiring staff but for now we intend to remain all volunteer. In that same vein, we always need new volunteers. **Interested? Call 282-3733. We would love to have you join us to help our clients.**

Within these overall decisions is a strategic plan that covers the next three years. Some examples:

- We’ve decided that at least one of our aging (but trusty) delivery trucks will need to be replaced in the coming years
- We have reviewed our governance and created an operating manual for our volunteers and established a committee structure on the board to better address ongoing needs.
- We are updating our use of technology with an improved client database and are in the process of updating our FreeStore website.

Want more details? You are all invited to our annual meeting May 13 at 5 p.m. in the main warehouse where we will give highlights and honor the many volunteers that make the FreeStore possible.

In conclusion, I want you to know we are solid! We are financially healthy, we make good use of your donations, and we’re committed to serving our clients. We are firmly established as a niche charity that truly makes a difference for the people we serve, our clients. The payback? Think of all those smiles and tears of gratitude as we help families start over in safe apartments with furniture and household goods provided by you!

Fill the Mayflower



It’s time to fill the Mayflower again. You’ll find the truck—and lots of helpful volunteers—at the Valley West Mall from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on May 18. As always, we need gently used furniture and kitchen items, pots and pans, microwaves, crockpots, vacuum cleaners, and lamps. We especially need twin and queen beds, bunk

beds, and bedding to go with. Please, no hide-a-beds or other large furniture. Your donations help hundreds of families to get a fresh start. As always, many thanks to Valley West Mall, Children and Families of Iowa, and to Select Van and Storage, the Mayflower people.

Judy Bloom, Logistics

The Ms. Logistics—or Boss Lady—of the FreeStore warehouse is volunteer manager Judy Bloom.

Want to know where to put those donated mattresses and dressers? Need to schedule Saturday household deliveries for domestic abuse clients, or re-schedule because of weather delays, or arrange for some extra delivery volunteers? Have a domestic abuse client who needs our services? Judy has the answers.

“She’s one of the most organized people I have ever met,” says FreeStore Board Chair Marty Rathje.

“She puts you to work and values your time as a volunteer. She does a terrific job as both our warehouse manager and as the primary contact for our domestic abuse clients,” he said.

Judy has been involved with the charity almost from the day that she and husband John moved to central Iowa 13 years ago. “I wanted to be involved in a smaller charity and I happened to see an article about the FreeStore in a community newspaper,” she said. She then met charity co-founders Harry and Terry Swanson, who convinced her to give it a go. She has been a regular ever since.

She started out as a greeter—the person who helps clients pick out furniture and household items—and donation-sorter at the charity’s first warehouse on the city’s near east side.

“I love organizing things,” she said. For example, it was Judy who organized the delivery schedules on

Saturdays. Bankers Trust provides volunteers on one weekend a month, Holy Trinity Lutheran of Ankeny does another, Des Moines University students pitch in for a third, and a wide roster of volunteers fill in the final weekend.

She’s also a superb shopper. When we’re short of donated vacuum cleaners or microwaves, count on Judy to find 40 of each at rock bottom prices.

Her career as a teacher in Rock Island, Ill., and Ottumwa and Cedar Falls honed her organizational skills, she said. “As a teacher, you had to know exactly what you wanted to go over every day.”

The FreeStore has been a good fit for her energy, she said. The feedback from clients, many of whom have almost no possessions, has been heartwarming. “There have been a lot of tears of gratitude,” she said.

And she enjoys the teamwork and camaraderie that the charity offers.

“We didn’t know anybody when we moved here, so the FreeStore has become our extended family. We really enjoy these people,” she said.



Judy Bloom as seen against a bank of mattresses at the FreeStore’s main warehouse.

FreeStore by the Numbers

	2018	2017
Families served <i>26% increase</i>	290	229
<i>Adults</i>	314	265
<i>Children</i> <i>68% of client families have children</i>	455	397
Est. value of delivered household items	\$525k	\$451k
Est. tons delivered	226	186

2018 Cash Revenue **\$102,470 includes:**
 \$53k fund raising and donations
 \$34k grants

2018 Cash Expenses **\$99,919 includes:**
 \$46k warehouse rent,
 \$19k purchases for clients
 \$8k truck maintenance
 \$12k dressers for kids