

MOTIVATION



MEET BOARD MEMBER

WILLIE F. BAILEY, SR.

Willie F. Bailey, Sr., deputy fire chief of Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department, likes to remind his firefighters that when they're not responding to 911 emergencies, they can find other ways to serve as a positive force of change in the community. That's exactly what Bailey set out to do while working as a firefighter in the 90s. Noticing kids huddling together for warmth at local bus stops, Bailey began collecting used coats, having them cleaned, and redistributing them through organizations such as schools and shelters. "[I recognize the struggle because] I grew up poor, on a farm, with no running water," Bailey explained. "I didn't get a brand-new coat until I was a sophomore in high school."

Then he met Operation Warm's founder, Dick Sanford, who had a similar story: looking around and realizing that kids in his community lacked basic necessities. Bailey began collaborating with Operation Warm and has served as a partner and funder for nearly 12 years—six of those as a member of our Board of Trustees. Today, Bailey's local nonprofit organization, [Firefighters and Friends to the Rescue](#), distributes around 5,000 brand-new Operation Warm winter coats to kids in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area every year.

"It's more than a coat; it builds kids' self-esteem," says Bailey. "We've had kids receive a coat and ask, 'When do I have to give it back?' We get to tell them, 'This coat is yours to take home.'"

Not everyone in Bailey's affluent community realizes that poverty is a problem for their neighbors. "Fairfax County is one of the richest counties in the country," said Bailey. "But believe me, there are pockets and neighborhoods where kids are living in poverty." 30% of the 200,000 kids who attend school in Fairfax County get free or reduced-price lunch, as do nearly 40% of children in the city of Alexandria. Over his 30-year career as a firefighter, Bailey saw that many kids were missing out on toys and festivities during the holidays. Firefighters and Friends to the Rescue started as a one-time event to deliver gifts to 50 families. 17 years later, the organization provides thousands of kids with free haircuts, backpacks filled with school supplies, warm winter coats, and new sneakers, along with holiday gifts.

Much of that growth has come from working with partners such as Operation Warm and by forging connections across the community that open up new avenues to serving kids in need. "Getting the fire department involved got the police department involved, which got the local politicians involved—and they have connections to local businesses to bring in donations and help us do even more," said Bailey. A big believer in the "it takes a village" mentality, he recalled how the community came together early in the pandemic to hold socially distanced coat distribution events and ensure kids got what they needed. Bailey and a team of dedicated volunteers arranged contact-free pickup for teachers and school counselors, who then distributed coats to their students.

"Meeting Operation Warm helped me to rethink how I feel about humanity," said Bailey. "I realized that there are many people out there who care."