

Highway Patrol Brings Bears to Delight Hospitalized Kids

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The 19th Annual Arizona Highway Patrol Christmas Bear Program for hospitalized Arizona children kicked off this week in the Pediatric Emergency Center, Mendy's Place, and the inpatient pediatric unit, KidsZone, at John C. Lincoln Deer Valley Hospital, 19829 N. 27th Ave., Phoenix.

In the playroom at KidsZone, four-year-old Anika Suarez had little to say to the officers offering her a choice of teddy bears, but her sparkling eyes and mischievous grin spoke volumes as she carefully considered her ursine options. Finally, she chose the fluffy white one.

Arizona Highway Patrol Association (AHPA) members, who are celebrating almost two decades of bringing Christmas joy to children receiving treatment in various medical centers across the state, have been bringing bears to children at the Deer Valley Hospital since Mendy's Place opened in 1998.

"The bears serve as communication mechanisms to help children better understand that police officers are to help and protect them," state Jimmy Chavez, President of the AHPA. "Witnessing the faces of those receiving the teddy bears is all that one needs to know the program is making a positive difference in many lives."

The mission of the program is to demonstrate children are the association's most important responsibility. AHPA collects new stuffed animals all year round for children. Many DPS Officers keep bears in their patrol cars, so they are always prepared to comfort a child they encounter.

Since 1993, the program has expanded to provide the stuffed teddy bears to both children and adults at their bed or road sides. The success is attributed to the efforts and talents of volunteers giving countless hours of their time to make the Christmas Bear Program an overwhelming success. Generous donations from Arizona's community have helped fund the bears each year.

In 2011, AHPA's volunteers distributed over 2,000 bears to hospitals throughout the state of Arizona. The 2012 program will give away bears to patients in statewide medical centers, domestic violence shelters and hospice locations.