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# Savannah Morning News.

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## Santa rings in holiday cheer for Salvation Army



Robert Hale volunteering with the Salvation Army for its Red Kettle Campaign. PROVIDED BY ROBERT HALE

**Ansley Franco**  
Savannah Morning News  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The bell cuts through the December air outside the storefront, rhythmic and familiar. Beneath the red suit and white beard, Robert Hale smiles at passersby as he calls out, “Merry Christmas!”

For the sixth holiday season in a row, Hale has taken on the role of Santa Claus — not for mall photos with kids begging for the newest LEGO set, but to ring a bell in volunteerism for strangers he will probably never meet.

The Salvation Army is celebrating its 125th year of the Red Kettle Campaign that raises tens of thousands of dollars for at-risk community members. Outside storefronts, volunteers will stand next to a red kettle and ring a small bell from early November to Christmas Eve collecting donations.

Funds raised provide services such as emergency shelter for women and children, alcohol programs for men,

emergency disaster services, food pantries and more. But this year, donations have been low, and remain \$45,000 below their goal.

Hale said he first began volunteering six years ago after searching for a fun community service opportunity.

“You make it as fun as you want it to be,” he said, mentioning dressing as Santa, inviting friends to volunteer and having a band play Christmas songs. “But then you start hearing the stories.”

Every so often, Hale said, people will stop to tell him that the Salvation Army once fed them or helped their family during a difficult time. Those moments and the reminders of the tangible impact the organization has within the community is what keeps him coming back.

“When people share those stories of how they’ve been helped by the Salvation Army, that’s when it gets real,” Hale said. “You understand that you’re not just having fun. You’re doing something for a very serious cause.”

But while the work carries real mean-

ing, Hale makes it a point to enjoy every moment.

Dressed in a Santa Claus suit, Hale often turns his community service into a family affair, inviting his children who visit Savannah during the holidays to volunteer alongside him. He also has recruited his friends who play the bass, trumpet and drums to perform live Christmas songs for the shoppers passing by.

“I will do this for as long as I’m able,” Hale said. “It’s a fun holiday tradition for me and my family.”

He encourages others to give bell ringing a try.

“Anybody can do it. You just need a smile and a bell, and they give you the bell so you’re good there.”

Those interested in volunteering can sign up or donate on the Salvation Army’s website.

*Ansley Franco is a reporter with the Savannah Morning News, covering public safety and general assignments. You can reach her at AFRanco@gannett.com.*

## County withdraws airport support

**Latrice Williams**  
Savannah Morning News  
USA TODAY NETWORK

During the Dec. 9 Bryan County commissioner meeting, local officials assured the community they heard their concerns when they passed a resolution to withdraw support from the airport authority. Established May 1 by Gov. Brian Kemp, the 11-member board was created to oversee funding sources and construction of an airport for small aircrafts to fly in and out of Bryan County and to house the planes for area pilots.

The resolution says the fiscal analysis proposed close to 180 aircrafts would be located at the facility but just 34 aircrafts are currently registered in the county and that the report is not supported by “credible evidence.”

State legislator Ron Stephens, who sponsored the bill, said he was aware of “public opposition” for the airport, so it did not come as a surprise when commissioners decided to back out of it.

“I’ve heard some folks say, we never should have done this and it kind of caught me off guard a little bit,” said Stephens regarding the resolution.

The county is asking state officials to draft a resolution to suspend the activities of the airport authority. County Chairman Carter Infinger expanded on the need for local officials to listen to the wants and needs of the community.

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### Note to readers

We will not be printing a paper on Thursday, Dec. 25, but will be providing it to you via the eNewspaper. You can always find the latest news on our website, mobile app, newsletters and social media. Subscribers can access the eNewspaper by going to our website and clicking on eNewspaper in the black navigation bar.

## Gun deaths persist; Georgia earns ‘F’ on safety

**Ansley Franco**  
Savannah Morning News  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Gun violence claims the lives of 2,005 people every year on average in Georgia, according to a Washington, D.C. based organization, with 45% of those deaths stemming from firearm homicide.

Research shows that state-level firearm regulations can play a significant role in reducing gun violence and suggests that broader adoption of these measures could lead to further declines in firearm-related deaths.

The Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence annually evaluates states based on the strength of their firearm

regulations. Georgia received the lowest possible grade, an F, reflecting what the organization describes as weak gun laws and the state’s role as a significant exporter of crime guns to other states.

The ranking comes after the Apalachee High School shooting last year where a 14-year-old student shot 11 people, killing four. Since 2020, Georgia has seen 129 mass shootings, and in 2023 gun violence became the leading cause of death among people ages 1 to 17 years old.

“What we know about school shootings is that these students access firearms in their homes, generally, because we do not have a culture of safety around firearm ownership,” said District 163 Rep. Anne Allen Westbrook at the

Chatham County Delegation Meeting on Dec. 5.

For this reason, Students Demand Action President at Savannah Arts Academy Zoe Wagner and other club members, asked a group of state representatives at the delegation meeting for stronger gun legislation.

Representatives in attendance were Ben Watson, Derek Mallow, Billy Hickman, Bill Hitchens, Carl Gilliard, Ron Stephens, Edna Jackson and Jesse Petrea.

Georgia House Bill 1, also known as the Pediatric Health Safe Storage Act, was the first piece of bi-partisan legislation Wagner brought to the attention of the nine representatives. It aims to prevent children from accessing unsecured

firearms by requiring guns to be safely stored and creates a misdemeanor offense for adults who allow children to readily access loaded guns.

The bill was introduced in mid-January 2025 but has not seen movement since then.

Wagner said this law could have saved a local 12-year-old years ago when she was shot and killed by the two-year-old she was babysitting after a loaded gun was left out in the open.

“A two-year-old does not have any mental health problems. They’re not depressed. They’re not a convicted felon,” she said. “What that two-year-old was, was a toddler that had been left by a gun

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