



PETITION TO THE TOWN COUNCIL

TOWN CLERK'S OFFICE  
BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND

To the Honorable Town Council of the Town of Bristol:

2026 MAR 27 PM 2:18

The undersigned hereby respectfully request of your

Honorable Body that:

Melissa Cordeiro  
Council Clerk


On behalf of the James D. Rielly Foundation, I respectfully request placement on the April 22 Town Council meeting agenda to present a proposal for the permanent location of the Bristol Santa House on the High Street side of the Town Common, north of the Byfield School.

Supporting materials are attached for review.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

Petition must be returned by 12:00 noon on the Friday prior to the Town Council meeting to appear on the docket of the 4-22-26 meeting for review and possible action. It is Council policy that action may not be taken on petitions unless recommendations, if necessary, from appropriate departments are received prior to the Council meeting.

DATE RECEIVED: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE:   
NAME: Michael Rielly  
ADDRESS: 21 Sandy Lane

# The Bristol Santa House

## Purpose of This Document

This document provides background on the James D. Rielly Foundation and the mission of the Bristol Santa House, and presents a proposal for a new, purpose-built Santa House on the Bristol Town Common, north of the Byfield School.

## The Bristol Santa House

The Bristol Santa House is not a seasonal photo set. It is a permanent expression of Bristol's values: generosity, patience, dignity, and community care.

What makes the Bristol Santa House nationally unique is not simply the presence of Santa Claus, but the model itself. There is no other program in the country offering **scheduled appointments specifically designed for children and adults with disabilities**, delivered in a fully immersive environment, **completely free of charge to all visitors**.

There are many places where families can take photographs with Santa. The Bristol Santa House is not that kind of place.

Each December, the Santa House offers a free, unhurried, sensory-aware holiday experience focused on time and human connection rather than transactions. Families are welcomed at their own pace. Appointments are available to reduce waiting, overstimulation, and uncertainty. Volunteers are trained to meet each guest where they are.

The experience is intentionally designed for children and adults with special needs and their families, while remaining open to the public.

## Organizational Background

The Bristol Santa House is a program of the James D. Rielly Foundation (JDRF), a Rhode Island-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The Foundation is entirely volunteer-run. No one receives a salary or compensation.

JDRF exists to continue the values exemplified by James D. Rielly: kindness, inclusion, service, and quiet generosity. The Santa House is one expression of that mission.

In addition to operating the Bristol Santa House, the James D. Rielly Foundation provides approximately \$10,000 to \$12,000 annually in direct charitable support through its other programs. These funds are distributed separately from Santa House operations and benefit veterans, and the children and families of military members, first responders, and law enforcement.

A common misconception is that the Bristol Santa House is part of the Bristol Christmas Festival or a commercial holiday attraction. It is not. It is independently operated and funded by the James D. Rielly Foundation through corporate sponsorships, grants, donations, and board support.

## History and Current Conditions

The Bristol Santa House began its inaugural season on State Street in 2022. Since that time, it has grown steadily in scale, impact, and community significance.

For the past four seasons, the Santa House has been transported to and from downtown Bristol each year and stored off-site during the off-season. The existing structure measures 22 feet by 16 feet and has been placed on the Bristol Statehouse property for the 2023, 2024, and 2025 seasons.

While this approach allowed the program to launch and mature, continued annual relocation is no longer sustainable. Challenges include:

- Increasing wear and visible damage to the structure
- Safety risks to volunteers during transport and placement
- Rising storage and logistics costs
- Reliance on in-kind transportation support that cannot be guaranteed long-term

## Impact and Community Value

The Bristol Santa House has experienced steady growth and meaningful impact:

- More than 6,500 visitors during the 2025 season (December 1–23), a 26 percent increase over the prior year
- 275 children and adults with special needs served directly
- 988 individuals served when including families and caregivers, representing a 47 percent year-over-year increase

Visitors travel from across Rhode Island, the broader Northeast, and beyond, with many families returning year after year. Even after the holiday season has ended, Foundation security cameras regularly record families and visitors stopping in front of the Santa House to take photographs. This behavior underscores an important shift: **the Bristol Santa House has become a destination**, not merely a seasonal curiosity.

On designated appointment days, children and adults with special needs receive a small gift at no cost, provided as an extension of the care and hospitality that defines the Bristol Santa House experience.

Public feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, reflected in community testimonials, social media engagement, and sustained media interest at the local, regional, and national levels.

*“The Santa House wasn’t just a visit with Santa — it was a whole experience. Once inside, there was no rush at all, and my child was able to stay and have as much time as she wanted.” – Jennifer M.*

*“The Santa House has to be the best thing to ever happen to Rhode Island.” – David F.*

*“As a family with a child on the autism spectrum, this experience was the exact opposite of the usual Santa visit. Calm, thoughtful, and truly welcoming.” – Sarah A.*

*“File under places that make you feel like a kid again!” – Discover Newport*

*“My nonverbal grandson spoke his first word to Santa. That night was a gift I will treasure for the rest of my life.” – Nancy M.*

These outcomes do not occur in high-throughput, commercial environments. They occur because the Bristol Santa House is designed with dignity, patience, and care.

## What the Bristol Santa House Is — and Is Not

### **What it is**

- A free, appointment-based, sensory-aware holiday experience
- A mission-driven program operated by a nonprofit foundation
- A community tradition grounded in time, presence, and respect

### **What it is not**

- A mall-style photo operation (photos are welcome, but never the purpose)
- A commercial attraction
- A high-volume, transactional experience

## A Legacy Project for Bristol

Our proposal is for a small, permanent structure designed to become part of Bristol's civic fabric and cared for over time.

The Bristol Santa House is envisioned as a legacy project, grounded in long-term stewardship rather than seasonal use. Key elements include:

### ***A permanent home***

A year-round building that becomes a familiar, well-maintained feature of the Town Common and a recognized point of reference for residents and visitors.

### ***Foundation stewardship***

Ongoing operation by the James D. Rielly Foundation to ensure free public access, consistent volunteer support, and continuity of mission.

### ***A volunteer-driven culture***

A trained and structured volunteer program that protects the guest experience and sustains the program year after year.

### ***Accessibility by design***

Practices and environments that adapt to each guest, ensuring that individuals and families with varying needs are welcomed with dignity.

### ***Heritage storytelling***

A modest interpretive element that honors the life and example of James D. Rielly and connects the Santa House to Bristol's broader civic story.

Bristol has a long tradition of stewarding civic gifts that outlast a single generation. Linden Place, the Bristol Statehouse, Colt State Park, Colt School, Blithewold, and other historic landmarks were created as acts of civic generosity and are maintained because they reflect enduring community values. The Santa House is envisioned as a small-scale companion to those places - offered freely, maintained carefully, and valued because it reflects who the community is.

## Proposed Site and Use

The James D. Rielly Foundation proposes a year-round placement on the Bristol Town Common, north of the historic Byfield School building. Site placement would:

- Respect existing sightlines and circulation
- Maintain flexibility for major civic events such as the Fourth of July
- See attachment for proposed location

## Off-Season Appearance and Use

Outside of the December operating period, the Santa House would be fully dormant:

- No holiday decorations
- No seasonal lighting
- No alternate themed uses

The structure would read as a small, historically compatible outbuilding on the Common. Limited lighting could be activated for select civic occasions, such as the Fourth of July.

Occasional small-scale fundraising or community gatherings benefiting JDRF or other mission-aligned nonprofits could be explored, subject to Town approval.

A permanent electrical connection would be required. No plumbing or permanent foundation is proposed.

## Design and Historic District Considerations

The proposed site lies within Bristol's Historic District and falls under the jurisdiction of the Historic District Commission.

JDRF is prepared to rebuild the Santa House as a new structure, no larger than 22 feet by 22 feet, designed to align with HDC guidelines. At a conceptual level, this includes:

- One-story, single-room form
- Victorian Revival–inspired proportions and detailing
- Exterior materials appropriate to period

All final design decisions would be subject to review and approval.

## Stewardship, Insurance, and Guarantees

The James D. Rielly Foundation makes the following commitments:

- Full responsibility for maintenance, landscaping, snow removal, and seasonal care
- General liability insurance coverage for year-round placement
- Installation and monitoring of security cameras and alarm systems
- Establishment of a dedicated escrow account to fund the removal of the structure and restoration of the site if ever required

These commitments are guarantees, not aspirational goals.

## Addressing Common Concerns

### **Security and Vandalism**

- No vandalism incidents during four seasons of operation
- Existing camera coverage and live monitoring
- Additional cameras to be installed as needed
- Existing nearby municipal camera coverage

### **Organizational Continuity**

- JDRF is a financially stable nonprofit with long-standing sponsors and grant support
- Governed by an active Board of Directors comprised of experienced professionals with strong community ties
- Escrow provisions ensure the Town bears no future burden

## Honoring James D. Rielly

The Santa House is part of the living legacy of James D. Rielly, a longtime custodian of the Bristol Statehouse and Santa Claus for more than six decades.

Jim Rielly's contributions to Bristol and beyond are already woven into the town's civic record. A street bears his name, he is an inductee of the International Santa Claus Hall of Fame, and a portrait of him hangs in Town Hall. His life's work was entered into the United States Congressional Record, and he received letters of recognition from Presidents, Senators, and His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, acknowledging his lifelong service to children and adults with disabilities.

The Bristol Santa House carries forward the spirit Jim Rielly brought to Bristol every day, a generous, open-hearted presence that made everyone feel welcome and valued.

As a secondary enhancement, the Town and Foundation could consider modest landscape improvements in the immediate area, including the possible relocation of Jim Rielly's commemorative bench from Rockwell Park, should the Town feel that placement near the Santa House is appropriate.

The Foundation would assume responsibility for the care of this area and fund associated improvements.

## Looking Ahead

The Bristol Santa House has grown beyond a seasonal experiment. It has become a trusted tradition and a point of pride for the Town. This proposal reflects the same long-term stewardship, fiscal responsibility, and care the James D. Rielly Foundation applies across all of its programs.

This proposal seeks to create a permanent home that is historically appropriate, carefully stewarded, and worthy of the community's trust. The Bristol Santa House is a place where memories are made quietly, year after year, and where Bristol's values are reflected not in words, but in how people are welcomed.







**TOWN CLERK'S OFFICE**  
Melissa Cordeiro, Town Clerk

10 Court Street  
Bristol, RI 02809  
Tel. 401-253-7000  
Fax. 401-253-2647  
Email: Mcordeiro@bristolri.gov

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Steven Contente  
TOWN ADMINISTRATOR

FROM: Melissa Cordeiro  
TOWN CLERK

DATE: March 30, 2026

RE: Michael Rielly, James D. Riley Foundation request  
permanent placement of the Bristol Santa House on  
High Street side of the Town Common, north of  
Byfield School

---

May we please have your recommendation or the recommendation of the department head you deem appropriate in order for the Council to review the request at the Town Council Meeting to be held on **April 22, 2026**.

**All items for this docket must be received in the Clerk's office by Wednesday, March 15, 2026. All and any items received after the deadline will be held until the next council agenda.**

Thank you for your cooperation and prompt reply.

Attachments