

Is Santa Coming to Town? Maybe --- Demand is high but St. Nicks are in short supply

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FULL TEXT

In her 39 years booking Santas for holiday events, Susen Mesco says she hasn't had a year like this one.

Ms. Mesco has worked late nights and early mornings since September, fielding calls on average every eight minutes from clients desperate to secure a jolly, bearded man in a red suit for their holiday event. Never before, not even in the Christmas-party boom of the 1980s, has she had to turn customers away.

"I had one lady call me up two days ago in tears. She needed a Santa for her country club," said Ms. Mesco. "She said, 'I'm willing to pay anything.' And I said, 'That's not fair.'"

A tight labor market has made it tough to find truck drivers, restaurant workers and retail employees. Add to that list Santas, who are both in high demand, some bookers say, and short supply as some would-be Saint Nicks stay on the sidelines of the labor market. Working Santas are capitalizing on their scarcity value, bumping up hourly rates and packing their schedules.

Many Santas stuck to virtual appearances last year due to pandemic concerns. Now, with Covid cases falling and people eager to gather for the holidays, those in the Santa industry say demand has rebounded and then some. Concerns about the virus are still high among a group of workers that skews toward older, heavier-set men, and those in the Santa industry say it is harder than usual to find qualified candidates. The shortage has overwhelmed bookers, sent organizations looking for bearded volunteers and forced some event coordinators to settle for Santa visits in mid-October.

As president of American Events and Promotions and founder of a professional Santa school in Denver, Ms. Mesco says she currently has around 3,000 men in her Santa network. She also has 200 women and says Mrs. Claus is increasingly getting solo bookings. Early this year, she knew there was going to be a problem. Ordinarily she books 15 or 20 "Christmas in July" events. By late February, she says she had already booked 70.

Ms. Mesco said most weekends in late November and December booked up months ago. Of the 43 Santas she works with in Denver, they are all locked in from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m. every weekend until early January. She has fewer Santas overall this year. Cost varies widely by event, location and date, she said, with some of her Santas in less populated areas earning \$80 an hour and those in big cities earning several hundred. Her take is 10% to 15%. She said Santas are earning about 12% more this year.

Clients who didn't book early have had to be flexible. Some ended up with a visit from Santa before Halloween, while others locked in less traditional calendar dates. "You can still have a wonderful cookie exchange from 4:30 to 6:30 in your neighborhood on a Tuesday night," she said.

Armando da Silva, who works as the recreation supervisor for the city of Hanford, Calif., started sending emails and making phone calls in July, trying to find a Santa for the town's holiday events, which require three Saturday shifts in December from 3 to 6 p.m. "I got extremely frustrated," said Mr. da Silva. "If you have a winter wonderland with no Santa, you're in trouble." When things looked especially dire late last month, a local resident volunteered to work the shifts. Mr. da Silva considered the offer but ultimately decided the man was neither rotund nor hirsute enough to pull off the role. "He would fit as an elf rather than a Santa," he said. Mr. da Silva finally found a professional

Santa who lives a few towns over: He has a real beard.

Christina Casella, chief development officer for SA Youth, a nonprofit in San Antonio, needs a dozen Santas for appearances at various sites around the city – she's got a limited budget so she was hoping to find volunteers. Ms. Casella reached out to Santas who had volunteered in the past and put out calls on social media. "It has just been crickets," she said.

Stephen Arnold, chief executive of IBRBS, formerly known as the International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas, says demand is on par with previous years but Covid concerns constrain supply. "There are as many Santas as there were in 2018 and 2019 but their willingness to work certain types of gigs where they might be at risk is still limited," said Mr. Arnold.

Still a working Santa himself, Mr. Arnold has committed to at least 100 in-person events this season – many more than he did last year, and more than 2019 as well. In addition, he may do about 140 virtual visits this season. He says he wouldn't work an open party where some guests may be unvaccinated but he's also not requesting venues provide him a "snow globe" – a 10-foot see-through bubble where Santa is protected. He used one last year. Venues are asking if he needs one again, and he has declined. Inside the globe, he doesn't feel "I can be as dramatic."

Chris Kennedy – who just finished training with the New England Santa Society and is working for the first time as a Santa in North Little Rock, Ark. – already has a packed schedule. He's booked 160 virtual visits (about five minutes each), in addition to 10 in-person events. He declined 15 offers because he was already booked and another 10 because they fell when he plans to be on vacation. "Those specific times I'm taking off," he said. This Santa doesn't work Christmas.

Credit: By Katherine Bindley

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