

Central Pennsylvania Food Bank BackPack Program Toolkit



What is a Backpack Program?

Every Backpack food program is unique to the community and school it serves. Generally, Backpack food programs provide a bag of nonperishable food to children in need that they can take home and eat when school meal programs are unavailable. These bags are often distributed into children's backpacks at school or a community program site to participating children in plastic bag by their teacher as they leave Friday or before a long break. Depending on the type of school or age of the students, food may also be distributed at the school office or in another central location inside or outside of the school. The contents of the bag can vary depending on the food and donations available. Many programs are able to provide enough food to replace the meals that children would receive at school (e.g. two breakfast options, two lunch options, two snack options, one can of fruit, and one can of vegetables). For other programs, this is a supplemental program not meant to replace every meal.

Backpack food programs are commonly run by volunteers and sustained by donations of community members and private foundations. Often, backpack food programs are run through food banks or food pantries that are already providing emergency and supplemental food assistance for families in need. Federal reimbursement is not available for the food provided by backpack food programs. The term Backpack Program is trademarked by the national organization Feeding America®.

History

The first backpack food program began in 1995. The program was developed in Little Rock, Arkansas out of the concern of a school nurse who was seeing a large number of children in her clinic tired, sick, and falling behind in class because of hunger and food scarcity in their homes. She approached her local food bank, the Arkansas Rice Depot, to help her address the problem. Together, they launched the Food for Kids program which provided food for kids discretely in bags or backpacks to take home during the weekends when school meals were unavailable. Today, there are hundreds of backpack food programs across the country serving thousands of children.

Why Start a Backpack Program?

In Pennsylvania, nearly 40 percent of the children that participate in the National School Lunch Program receive their meals for free or at a reduced price. Children are at risk for hunger and many families struggle to provide them the nutrition they need to thrive. As a result, many children are coming to school too distracted by their empty stomachs to focus on doing well in school. Local backpack food programs are one way to provide needed.

A Backpack Program is a great way to get food directly into the hands of children who need it. A child who is ill-equipped to learn because of hunger and poverty is more likely to be poor as an adult. As such, the existence of childhood hunger in the United States threatens future American prosperity. The Backpack Program is an effective way to address child hunger in your community. For more information about starting a Backpack Program, please read on.

1. Identify Schools or Programs to Serve

Do you have a school or an after-school program in your area that has a need for the Backpack Program? Have you already made contact with school personnel and determined the need?

The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank currently has its Backpack Program in 17 counties within its 27 county service area which includes both rural communities that have limited access to resources and inner city schools with youth who have limited resources. The Backpack Program helps alleviate child hunger by addressing the lack of food resources on weekends and holidays for children who are at risk of hunger through the provision of kid-friendly food items for them to consume at their place of residence.

When getting started, it is important that you don't do too much too soon. Set your goals accordingly. Begin in the schools where you know the need is great and where the principal and staff are in full support of the program.

2. Establish Your Budget

Account for food costs, plastic bags to pack food, administrative time and then any other miscellaneous costs. It costs Central Pennsylvania Food Bank between \$3.50 and \$6.00 per pack of food, including the cost of food and transportation expenses.

Before starting a Backpack Program, you will also need to decide how to fund the program. We suggest looking to community groups and clubs, businesses, churches, and individuals for financial donations. A school's PTO or school board may be a good place to start to rally support for the program. Be creative and consider all types of funding sources. In our experience funders have been very supportive of the Backpack Program.

For our partners with concerns about funding, the Central Pennsylvania Food bank strongly believes that strong programs are a result of community support. We also realize that this can take time and name recognition in your local community. A limited number of matching grants are made available to programs based on need.

3. Develop the Paperwork

We have sample paperwork for you to give to the principal, school counselors, and others helping with the program. This paperwork includes the Program Agreement, Coordinator Responsibilities, Monthly Report, and Sample Letter to Parents.

4. Evaluate Your Inventory

If you have to purchase food, have you determined what kinds of foods are best and the amount per week to put in a backpack? How will you separate the Backpack Program food from your regular food inventory? Do you receive a large amount of donated items that can be used for the program? How will you purchase the food? You may be able to purchase food from the Food Bank. Please contact us for more information about becoming a partner agency.

If you receive donated food items then by all means get Backpack Program items from that supply. That will cut costs significantly! If you have to purchase most of your food you will want to carefully consider how many items to put in each backpack. Remember that some kids may not have working appliances and that there are many cases where there is no adult supervision to prepare meals. We feel it is very important to put the most nutritious items possible in the backpacks and have the following advice to provide the best nutrition for children:

- Include high protein items, such as chili, beans and franks, spaghetti-o's with meatballs, or products containing peanut butter.
- Incorporate a low fat-calcium rich food, such as shelf stable milk, to ensure your children are getting at least one of the 3-4 servings of dairy a day which is necessary for building strong bones and teeth.
- Choose nutritious cereal with no more than 25% of total calories from sugar (about 10 grams of sugar or less per serving)
- When selecting snack options, choose single serving packaging with no more than 35% calories from fat or sugar (with the exception of fat in nuts or seeds)
- If including a fruit cup, always select fruit packed in its own fruit juice or light syrup
- If including a juice box, always use 100% fruit juice

5. Set up a Delivery Schedule

The number of times you deliver each month will depend on the number of children referred to the program and the available storage space. We have a delivery schedule for member agencies or you can coordinate food deliveries with our logistics department. Deliver either a one, two or four week supply of food to your schools. Until you get a feel for how big your orders are and how much space a school has, it may take more deliveries than necessary. At the time of delivery or their pick-up, you may want to get a physical inventory count so that you can adjust the next order.

6. Parental Consent

The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank requires parental permission to participate in the Backpack Program. We have found that a "best practice" among participating schools is to send each child home with the first food pack and a letter describing the program. This encourages participation, as parents can see firsthand the nutritious food items their child will receive each week.

Tips for Program Success

While every program is different, below you will find some tips and tricks that our partners have found to be helpful when planning and managing Backpack programs:

Establish criteria for who should receive a backpack. Probably one of the biggest problems we had initially was trying to explain and identify what children should participate in the program. If you don't have a clear grasp on who the Backpack Program is for, then you won't be able to educate staff as to how to identify backpack recipients. The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's Backpack Program targets food insecure children through school staff, teachers, and counselors. Oftentimes cafeteria staff identify children who are rushing the food lines Monday morning because they have not had enough food over the weekend. Other times teachers are already buying food for children who they know need the extra help.

Advocate that this program maintain a level of confidentiality. Another thing to be aware of is in your initial meeting with the school advise them about "advertising" the program to the students. Make sure the school does what it can to maintain the confidentiality of the students. This can also help prevent program recipients from being made fun of. Generally speaking, the younger children have no problem receiving the backpack, while the 5th and 6th graders can easily become embarrassed.

Provide step-by-step instructions for the school. Before a school begins distributing food and backpacks make sure they have their system worked out for how they will fill the backpacks and distribute them. They will need to know where the food will be stored, who will help pack the backpacks, and who will distribute them to the children.

Go on site visits. It makes a big difference if you keep in good contact and develop good relations with staff at the schools. You may also be surprised in what you discover by just showing up. Through your observations, you will have a better understanding of what does and doesn't work for your program.

Make decisions about food for siblings early. In some programs, they allow the school to provide extra food for the siblings of a student. The problem with this is that some were sending a whole portion of additional food that was too heavy for the student to carry. Please point out to the school coordinator that they can add extra food, they just need to be aware of how heavy it can become and adjust it accordingly. You may decide it is not necessary to provide extra food for siblings, however, most school staff like the fact that kids can take home extra if they need it.

Determine what you will use to hold the items early in the planning process. The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's Backpack Program plans to provide a durable backpack to each child enrolled in the program. Many agencies deliver food in a plastic bag, to be put in the child's backpack. Teachers and counselors distribute food discreetly to each participating child.

Be sensitive to the environment at each school. Every school is different. With that in mind it is important to make your program adaptable. Although agency's provide guidance, we encourage you to let them know they have the ability to tailor the program to make it work best for them. Being sensitive and supportive builds better bridges than being demanding and telling the school how you want them to run the program.

Contact Information

Questions? Comments? Concerns?

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