

BACKPACK PROGRAM

"Changing lives through nutrition"



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Mission of Backpack

The Backpack Program provides nutritional meals and snacks to youth whose primary source of food is the school cafeteria. By providing a backpack with food items to help sustain them until returning to school for a meal, their nutritional, mental, and overall well-being needs are met. The success seen by participants in this program is astonishing! Documentation and feedback from administrative staff, faculty, parents, and children shows distinct improvements in behavior, academics, social interaction, and a lengthened attention span. Not only is the program worthwhile to children in need of assistance, but some school districts have budgeted for the program as a result of these improvements. With this program we hope to reach children throughout the community and establish an effective outreach program to enrich the lives of children in need.

The identities of the students who participate in the Backpack Program are kept confidential; adhering to this policy ensures that no student can be identified for any reason. Although we ask for the site to send information about the number of distributed backpacks, we never ask for the identity of a child.

The backpacks used in the program are similar to the everyday backpacks used at school and no symbols are used to signify participants. Backpacks are distributed once a week (usually on Friday afternoon unless observed holiday etc.) and sent home with participating students. It is the child's responsibility to return the backpack. If the student does not return the backpack, we assume the food is not needed, therefore no food will be sent home for the weekend. If a child forgets their backpack an alternative "pack" is used.

The most effective means of distributing the backpacks is up to the discretion of the distribution site. It is recommended that you try and work around any existing policies or procedures that school may have in place so as to avoid conflict. Distribution of the packs should be easy and time effective.

By piloting a Backpack Program, we gain community support to reach more underserved youth as well as promote community awareness of the rising poverty levels in East Texas. Through partnering with the East Texas Food Bank, your local member agency, and community business/supporters, you impact lives of children and provide the nutrition they need to learn, grow, play, and live healthier lives.

Site Responsibilities



Comply with guidelines and requirements set by America's Second Harvest and East Texas Food Bank



Maintain accurate records of children served and number of backpacks distributed weekly and submit the information to the Food Bank



Select a distribution plan that is time effective, easy, and sufficient for children participating in the program (the campus coordinator and program coordinator should evaluate current dismissal plan, construct a procedure, and devise a distribution method that meets both the needs of the children and the campus)



Notify parents of participants informing them of the program and when to expect backpacks



Ensure that participants' identities are kept confidential



Work collaboratively together: share ideas, suggestions, and have fun!

Backpacks will be stuffed and re-distributed by members of the Tyler Junior League, Inc. and the participating site volunteers.

Referring/Identifying Participants

How to identify a "chronically hungry" child:

The Backpack Program is for students who are at risk of hunger due to financial insecurity and thus are not receiving the nutrition they need outside of the food provided by the school district. Guidelines and identifying components are established to recognize these children. Below are the terminology and definitions commonly used.

Food Insecure:

If a child does not get enough food outside of school, they are considered "food insecure." The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as households that are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the basic needs of their family. A child may not necessarily tell you that their nutritional needs are not being met, but by looking for a few key behaviors that food insecure children exhibit you may be able to identify them.

Examples:

- **Rushing to the cafeteria line or showing up noticeably early for breakfast**
- **Consistently cleaning their plate and not carelessly throwing portions away**
- **Lingering around for seconds or asking others for their leftovers**
- **Rushing to food lines**
- **Exhibiting extreme hunger on Monday morning**
- **Lingering around food lines**

How to respond to a child that says they are hungry:

A child who complains about being hungry may not necessarily a child who automatically qualifies for the Backpack Program. Generally speaking, growing children have a considerable appetite and may say they are hungry throughout the day. However in the case off a chronically hungry child there are certain questions to be asked to assess need.

In the morning, a child may say they are hungry:

- Ask them if they ate breakfast. If they are eligible or are a participant of the free/reduced price program, then make sure they are taking advantage of it.
- If they say they skipped breakfast, find out why. Ask if they had enough food for breakfast or if it was just a case waking late and not having time to eat.
- If they did eat breakfast, ask what they ate and if it was enough.
- You may also ask if they ate dinner the previous night and if enough to fill them up.

By asking a few questions you should be able to assess whether this is a case of normal hunger, where your stomach growls in anticipation for food, or of food insecurity - the inability to afford enough food. A child who complains there is never enough food in the house or all they ate for dinner were potato chips is the child who is considered "chronically hungry." Even if a child worries that there will not be enough food at home, this is a cause for concern - food insecurity is the main reason for this program.

Other indicators of food insecurity:

Physical Appearance

Physical indicators of nutritional deficiencies include:

- **Skin appears swollen or puffy due to possible protein deficiency**
- **Noticeable thinness due to insufficient calories**
- **Redness and/or cracking around the lips**
- **Dry and itchy eyes indicator of possible vitamin A deficiency**

A child's weight is not always an indicator of food insecurity.
Some obesity is caused from poor nutrition in the diet of a child.

School Performance and Behavior

The following behaviors exhibited in students may be indicators of food insecurity:

- Excessive absences
- Child consistently displays a combination of any of the following behaviors: hyperactivity, aggressiveness, irritability, anxiety, distress, passive/aggressiveness
- Repetition of a grade
- Difficulty in forming friendships and/or getting along with others
- Child often exhibits the following symptoms: sore throat, common cold, stomach ache, ear infection, or excessive fatigue
- Child appears to have a short attention span or general inability to concentrate

Home Environment

Sometimes a child may be very open about what is going on at home. For example, a child may say that their dad has lost his job and mom doesn't/can't work, or he/she may complain of a consistent lack of sufficient food in the home. Careful listening to your students along with communication with their families will allow you to assess the needs of the student; specifically whether or not they are in need of assistance.

Any child who exhibits any of the risk factors listed above should be considered as a candidate for the BackPack Program.

Program Documentation/ Non-Compliance Procedure

It is imperative that the participating site provides the necessary documentation required from the sponsor. These records will be used for distribution, food inventory, etc.

Forms located in this section:

Weekly Documentation Form

Monthly Report Form

In order to ensure that Backpack will be successful, we must work together in advance to identify, discuss, and solve problems. If you observe a problem or inconsistency within the program, contacting us will help the issue be resolved in a time effective manner. Here are the steps to take should a problem occur:

Noncompliance Procedure:

- Identify noncompliance issue
- Site/Operational coordinator for participating program and/or Food Bank Program Coordinator evaluate the issue together
- Devise a detailed intervention plan including a timeframe for completion
- Follow- up visit to observe if noncompliance issue is now in compliance by specified date

Continuation of the noncompliance issue will be documented and brought before a committee of Food Bank staff. We request that site coordinator be present to discuss what further action will be taken (i.e. probation of agency, program closure, etc), depending on the severity of the issue.

Frequently Asked Questions

In this section you will find frequently asked questions regarding the Backpack Program.

How to tell children about the program:

Be honest but tactful with participants, especially young children. The manner in which you relay information greatly impacts their reaction to the program.

Suggested Idea:

Hold a special meeting or assembly for the participants in the program. Include the purpose BackPack, how it operates, and the requirements to participate. Be sure to stress the importance of BackPack to their health. Only participants need to be aware of this meeting, though obviously complete anonymity is impossible. However, it is important that the identities of participants be kept confidential. Remember to be creative, and to work to build the self-esteem and confidence of the children!

Who can help me if:

- I am absent?
- Have a question?
- Need to make a change?
- Just need help?

I am available any time of any day to help assist you in any manner that I can. Enclosed in your handbook is a contact sheet of people to contact if you need. The Tyler Junior League volunteers are also available to answer your questions!

What if children return their backpacks with food still in it?

Collect the items and salvage the food. On your documentation for there will be a column to record returned/salvaged items - just remove and document.

What if a parent comes to us seeking or asking for more food to be included in the backpack?

This program focuses on children, not whole families or adults. If this situation arises, we will provide handouts containing all pertinent information of local area pantries and programs available in the community to serve larger numbers.

Sample of parent's letter/contact:

Your child will receive a backpack with food in it every Friday. If all the food is not eaten and if more food is needed for the next weekend, then your child must return their backpack by the _____, or they will not receive food. The food and backpack is offered at no cost to you or your child.

Calendar:

When working with schools, I suggest you plan, organize, and create a system using their established calendars. Since they must have approval before school starts, your schedule is easier to change than theirs. I can almost guarantee that they will not revise calendars to suite your specific program's needs. Therefore, bear in mind the schools calendar when scheduling the following events:

- **Distribution Dates**
- **Pick up dates**
- **Stuffing Dates**