

The Backpack Program

2014-2015 School Year Report

Shared Harvest Foodbank's signature program to address childhood hunger.

Why Backpack?

My mom worked days at Fort Hamilton hospital and my dad pulled the evening shift at Fisher Body. When my brother and I came home from school, there was always something to snack on before supper and there was never any doubt that there would be supper. Weekends we were treated to blueberry pancakes or bacon and eggs, southern fried chicken and corn fritters or something from the grill – in all kinds of weather. I remember my dad shoveling out a part of the back yard during winter so he could get to his grill – the man loved to fire up that charcoal! It is not surprising to me how many of my childhood memories are tied to the family sitting around the table on the weekends enjoying meals together.

The children we serve with the Backpack Program are growing up without building those memories, because many times, there just isn't enough food for their families in the house. When we started this program in 2007, I had no idea how widespread chronic childhood hunger was. I have learned.

I have learned that intervening in these young children's lives with a simple bag of food can make an incredible difference in how they look, how they act and how they participate in the classroom. I have learned that the food we give them, although intended for their needs over the weekends, actually provides for their siblings too, because they share what little they have.

I have learned that the snacks we provide, in addition to the meals, are sorted and stored in their cubbies or lockers so they have snacks of their own during snack time and don't have to ask the teacher in front of all the other students.

I have learned how grateful the teachers are to know their students will not go home without food for the weekends; and how grateful the parents are to know their children will have food to eat, even if they don't.

Most of all I have learned what caring communities we live and work in because you all are the reason why we could serve an average of 3,000 children each week with over 90,000 bags of food during the 2014/2015 school year. Please consider supporting the Backpack program again this coming school year by making your donation in the enclosed envelop or going online to www.sharedharvest.org clicking on give help and designating the Backpack program. Just \$3.50 adopts one child for the weekend, \$12 will feed one child for a month of weekends and \$105 will feed them for the school year. Thank you so much for your support.



Tina Osso, Executive Director



Butler County,
Warren County,
Greater Cincinnati,
Oxford & Vicinity



And the survey says...

Thousands of school children in Butler, Darke, Miami and Warren Counties rely on the Backpack Program to provide them with meals and snacks for the weekends when they can't have a school breakfast or lunch. The program has grown from serving a few hundred children in 2007 to serving an average of 3,006 students each week over a 30-week period in the 2014-15 school year, with providing a total of 90,172 bags of food. The least number of students served in one week was 2,401 and the most was 3,285. To refer a child to the Backpack program, the child should exhibit at least one of these indicators:

Behaviors: Rushing food lines; Extreme hunger on Monday morning; Quickly eating all of the food served and asking for more; Asking when the next meal/snack will be served; Regularly asking their teacher for food; Saving/hoarding/stealing food to take home for themselves and/or a sibling; Linger around for or asking for seconds; Comments about not having enough food at home; or Asking classmates for food they don't want.

Physical: Extreme thinness; Puffy/swollen skin; dry/cracked lips; dry and itchy eyes.

Performance: Excessive absences and/or tardiness; Repetition of a grade; Chronic sickness; Short attention span/inability to concentrate; Chronic behavior problems (withdrawn, irritable, anxious, etc.)

In the 2014/2015 school year, 950 surveys were sent to 71 schools and 24 Head Start sites, with 464 completed surveys returned, which is a 49% response rate.

Of those who responded, 74% reported the behavior of their students was very much or somewhat improved, 68% reported seeing very much or somewhat of an improvement in their physical appearance and 74% again reported seeing Backpack students improve performance in the classroom very much or somewhat better after entering the program. Actual Results:

	Very Much	Somewhat	Same	Got Worse
Behavior Improved	32%	42%	24%	1%
Better Physical Appearance	25%	43%	31%	1%
Improved class performance	29%	45%	25%	1%

The story of Cindy's family

We did a writing assignment about "Why the leprechaun should give me the gold". One boys' reasons were: (1) so mom can buy us food, (2) so we can pay bills, (3) so my family can pay for a water heater. For a 7-year old to think these thoughts... the Backpack program must help.

*Miller Ridge Elementary
Butler County*



"I can't put into words how much I appreciate the help! This is an amazing program!"

Cindy

Cindy with children (l-r): Christian, Isabella, Dustin and Anastasia

Imagine trying to prepare meals for a blended family of two adults and seven children ranging in age from preschool to high school. That's the dilemma facing Cindy and her family, who live in the Ansonia School District in Darke County. Fortunately, her three elementary children - Anastasia, Isabella and Dustin participate in Shared Harvest Foodbank's Backpack Program.

Cindy deeply appreciates the help, and so do her children since her husband is the sole provider in the household. "My kids are so tickled and just can't wait to open their bags to see what's inside," Cindy says. "It gives them something to look forward to on Fridays, and they never forget to pick up their bags."

The mandarin oranges, fruits and veggies are a hit, and her two oldest Backpack kids like the ravioli and other ready-to-fix meals, because they can make them when they get home. "They like it all, and they eat it all," she says.

Like many parents who struggle to make ends meet, Cindy is resourceful with some of the Backpack items. "We make muffins, and I'll use the Backpack applesauce since it's healthier for them than butter," she explains. She also uses fruits from the program to make larger fruit salads for the entire family.

The weekend treats come in handy when the children do homework. "They put their bags on the table when they get home, because our routine is to do homework first," Cindy says. "They each take out something to munch on while they work, so it's exciting for them."

The granola bars in the Backpacks are great for weekend mornings. "We're a very busy family with all of the kids involved in some type of activities, so they can take some of the snacks with them," she adds.

As the school nurse I see kids who say their tummy hurts or they have a headache. Many times its because they are hungry. The Backpack Program is a great resource for them.

*Madison Elementary
Butler County*

The story of Deanna's family

My student no longer states he is hungry or that he hasn't eaten. He is much happier and I've seen an improvement in his academics. He is so excited on Friday when he gets his Backpack bag!

*Salem Elementary
Warren County*



“We were really in a bind and this program helped us out.”

Deanna

*Monroe School liaison Lindsay Henriquez
with 5th grader Victoria*

From children to seniors, Shared Harvest Foodbank plays a large role in Deanna's family. She and her two children share a mobile home with her parents in the Monroe School District. Her mom takes part in the foodbank's signature program for seniors, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which provides a box of nutritious food each month. Her fifth grade daughter, Victoria, is part of the Backpack program.

Deanna gives credit to Monroe School District liaison Lindsay Henrriquez for reaching out to her family on many levels. "We were struggling, and I asked for help during the Christmas holiday," Deanna says. "Lindsay helped get Victoria into the Backpack Program. I didn't have any idea the schools offered this program. She explained to me all of the services that are available, and she also helped me get presents for the kids at Christmas."

As with many Backpack children, Victoria looks forward to receiving her weekly Backpack bag, going through each item before placing it in the pantry. "She loves the snacks they put in there, but she loves the mandarin oranges the most," Deanna says.

Deanna says Backpack is perfect for an 11-year old child. "It helps a lot having the ready-to-fix meals, because she can make her own meals, so I don't have to stop what I'm doing."

With one working adult in the household, it can be tough to have enough food for her parents, Victoria, and her son Bradyn, who is in high school. "I just think it's very helpful to us to have food from the Backpack program," Deanna explains. "We can't always afford to get all of the items we need at the store, so there's always something for Victoria to eat with her Backpack food."

Deanna also praises the work of school liaisons like Lindsay, who comes to the home to make sure she gets help with other needs like clothing.



*Monroe School liaison Lindsay Henrriquez
with Victoria's mother Deanna*

One teacher's heartfelt story about a Backpack child:

This little guy lived in an unstable home for most of the year (his home life is now much better- hooray!). His teacher told me he would come to school excited each Friday. When he walked in the classroom, he would go straight to the table where the bags were to put it in his cubby. During the school day, his teacher would notice him walking over to his cubby, touching the food, opening the bag to look at what was in it, and even hiding different things he could open himself in his backpack.

I can't even re-tell the story without tears coming to my eyes. It is so easy for me to take for granted so much of my life, and be so numb to the hunger of my students. I can't thank you enough for your hard work and generosity that has provided food bags to my kiddos this year. I hope you can pass this story onto those who support your program so they can know how grateful we are, and how important this program really is!

*Elda Elementary in Ross
Butler County*



Wanted to tell... but couldn't

Getting families to talk about their Backpack experiences is no easy task. Our original plan included talking to the mother of a Greenville elementary student and the mother of three elementary children in the Hamilton City Schools, but the interviews did not materialize.

In both cases, there are stories behind the stories of people who constantly live with hunger and poverty. They often live moment to moment, crisis to crisis, which means their plans can change rapidly. What would be a “normal” schedule for most of us is not possible for them. We twice attempted to meet with the mom from Hamilton, but one interview was cancelled when her father had to be taken to the hospital and the other fell through because of a trip she had to make to a government office.

We wish we could have shared the full story of the sweet little girl from Greenville, whose mother was unable to come to the interview. Through the eyes of the child and her school liaison, we learned what her life is like.

Her family's home often has 10-11 adults plus children living there, all part of her multi-generational family. Despite all the uncertainty in her life, the child loves the Backpack Program, and doesn't hesitate when asked her favorite food item. “I love the mandarin oranges. I eat them all the time!” she exclaims.

Her generosity shines through when you talk with her. She mentions sharing items from her Backpack with other kids in her home, because “we don't have a lot of money.”

We appreciate the many school officials who spent time trying to arrange interviews with Backpack families. They do so many little things to help that often go unnoticed.

My students really seem to appreciate the food we send home every Friday... I have heard from the community that this has been needed for years and what a wonderful program it is to have in our community.

*Tri Village
Darke County*

An elementary principal talks about Backpack



Ansonia Elementary School principal Krista Stump helped get Cindy's three elementary children into Backpack.

As a former teacher and now a school principal, Krista Stump understands the connection between food and learning. “Kids can’t learn when their belly is growling,” she says. The Ansonia Elementary School principal in Darke County says children who are fed can learn more. “It doesn’t mean our test scores are skyrocketing, but we are meeting needs of families and that’s the bottom line,” she adds.

Krista tells the story of a kindergarten child she met while serving as a principal in nearby Greenville. The boy came to school after the lunch hour and was hard to control until school officials began saving a lunch for him when he arrived. “His behavior - while not perfect - turned around,” she recalls. “It’s amazing the difference being fed made for that little boy.”

Krista says the Backpack Program is important because it’s a long time between Friday lunch and Monday morning breakfast at school. She points out many items in the food bags are things some children don’t get. Krista remembers one little girl who couldn’t wait to get home to open her Backpack. “So she peeked in her bag and said: ‘We never get this kind of food at home!’

School liaisons play key role

Many school districts in Butler County rely on liaisons with the Butler County Success program to help them work with families whose children are referred to the Backpack Program. Their work goes well beyond delivering Backpacks to kids on Friday, because they also visit families in their homes.

“I remember one family that had just moved here. They had no furniture and no refrigerator initially, and I realized these were people living in Butler County getting by without the bare necessities,” says Lindsay Henriquez, a school liaison for Monore Elementary School.

Lindsay says liaisons make home visits to assess other needs such as finding a doctor or a dentist, or finding shoes or clothing for kids. She also thinks it’s important to let parents give Backpacks to their kids. Lindsay loves watching the excitement of kindergarten through 2nd graders as they get their bags. “It’s fun watching them peek in the bag to see what’s there this week,” she says.

Confidentiality is also important in distributing Backpacks. Lindsey Hersha is a liaison at Fairfield East Elementary and tries to ensure the privacy of recipients so other kids don’t ask questions. Lindsey also understands the struggles many of the families face. “The middle to the end of the month can be very difficult, so Backpacks can really help the families,” she says.

Lindsey recalls one story that broke her heart - the story of a little boy whose family was going through a host of issues. “He came in one Friday and didn’t see his bag, and he broke down in tears,” she says. “Even though the issue was resolved, it really spoke to me about how much this boy relied on that food.”

A mom shared with me that on more than one occasion she was in tears because they had no food in the house (they had money, but no transportation – far out of town) and they couldn’t get to a store. This family has little support from anyone except their employer. This backpack program helped them more than we realized!

*Versailles
Miami County*

The story of Jamie's family

We have one particular set of cousins whose mothers live together. They are very good kids and both mothers try really hard, but they just struggle to provide all the needs of the girls. It is so beneficial to these girls to have adequate food at home so they can concentrate on their learning while at school.

*Rosa Parks Elementary
Butler County*



*Fairfield East Elementary School liaison Lindsey Hersha
with Jamie's children Samuel, Alex and Sara.*

“We try to save some of the Backpack items for the end of the month which is always a tough time.”

Jamie

As a mother of three elementary students, Jamie understands the vital role the Backpack program plays in the lives of her children. “I’m working part-time right now, so we don’t have a lot of money,” she says. “BackPack helps a lot to feed the kids on weekends, because things get really tight by the end of the month.”

Like many Backpack parents, Jamie has learned to set aside some of the food for later. “It helps a lot budget-wise in providing the food that we need,” she adds. “If they have items like spaghetti, it can help to provide a meal, or the vegetables can help add to another meal.”

Jamie says her kids enjoy the items in their Backpack bags, but they particularly enjoy the snack packs of pudding. “The snacks really come in handy when the kids are home on weekends to give them a little something between meals,” she says.

A teacher at Fairfield East helped get Samuel, Alex and Sara into Backpack, and they have been involved now for two years. Jamie is very appreciative of her school liaison, Lindsey Hersha. “She does a lot more than just help with Backpack,” Jamie explains. “She helps to get extra clothing for the kids, and she got a pair of glasses for my oldest child.”

Jamie points out Christmas and summer breaks are difficult times for families who rely on Backpack during the school year, because the kids are home all day and not receiving the school breakfasts, lunches and the weekend Backpacks.

Lindsey compliments Jamie for being resourceful with the food her three children receive. “If they have extra food, she saves it for those break periods when they need it most,” Lindsey says.



Jamie

I see firsthand how much the program helps the kids. They tell me every week what they ate and what was in the bag. Thanks for all you do!

*Woodside Elementary
Darke County*

Thanks to our many Backpack volunteers



BackPack has become a very popular volunteer opportunity at Shared Harvest Foodbank. Students from Montessori Academy of Cincinnati, employees of General Electric and individuals from a class at Miami University's Voice of America campus are just a few of the many who help us out.

Each Backpack makes a difference

The three thousand children in Shared Harvest Foodbank's Backpack Program would not be getting the food they desperately need without the help of our army of volunteers in Butler, Darke, Miami and Warren Counties.

The majority of Butler County school districts rely on volunteers who come to our warehouse to pack thousands of bags of food that are then delivered to each school building by another dedicated set of volunteers. In Darke County, Shared Harvest's truck delivers the bulk materials for the Backpacks to a central location, where volunteers from each school district take the items to another set of volunteers who pack them for the individual schools. Similar stories take place in Miami and Warren Counties where volunteers pack the individual bags and make sure they are transported to local elementary children.

It's not hard to find volunteers to help with Backpack. From individual volunteers to church and civic groups to businesses, many people have told us how good they feel knowing that their efforts help children who might go hungry otherwise. Beth Hulbert is retired and enjoys helping out with Backpack. She has helped bag the food at the warehouse but also has spent the past couple of years delivering food to the schools. "I enjoy doing this because I know I'm helping children who really need it," Hulbert says. "I don't get to see the children when I deliver, but I do get to talk with the school officials who deliver it to them."

Like Beth, Jim Cimprich is also a retiree who likes to help during the winter months. He's an avid hiker who says he likes the physical activity involved in walking around putting the food bags together. "I'm impressed by the quantity of Backpacks that go out," Jim says. "We don't get to see the children, but with as many bags as we prepare, we know there's a real need."

If you would like to become a volunteer for the Backpack Program, contact Shared Harvest's Community Engagement Director Ben Powers at (800) 352-3663 or e-mail Ben@SharedHarvest.org.



FOODBANK

*Hunger is not a choice.
Giving is.*

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