

Starting a BackPack Program

Guide for organizations providing weekend food to children in need



Thank you for your interest in starting a BackPack program! We hope you will find this to be a very rewarding program to benefit the children in your community. The following are some suggestions and best practices to help make your program successful.

What is the BackPack program?

The BackPack Program meets the needs of hungry children by providing them with nutritious and easy-to-prepare food to take home on weekends and school vacations when other resources are not available. The program was started at several Food Banks throughout the country, and has expanded rapidly.

Second Harvest has several BackPack programs throughout our 46-county service area in Middle and West Tennessee. Second Harvest's BackPack Program is designed to provide weekend food assistance to elementary age children through their school or an after-school program.

Second Harvest's ability to start new programs depends on funding coming in. As the demand for new programs surpasses the funding available for us to start the programs, we decided to make this handbook for organizations who are interested in starting and running their own BackPack programs.

Who is Second Harvest Food Bank?

Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee is a 501 (c)3 Not for Profit Organization. We are a member of Feeding America, the nationwide network of Food Banks throughout the United States. Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee is one of the largest and most comprehensive of over 200 food banks and food distribution centers nationwide. During the 2007 / 2008 fiscal year, Second Harvest distributed more than 10 million pounds of food to partner agencies and hungry men, women, and children in Tennessee. Our partner agencies include food pantries, soup kitchens, senior centers, low income daycare centers, homeless shelters, and domestic violence shelters. These agencies utilize Second Harvest for their food needs, which save them time and money. Second Harvest operates out of a large distribution center in Nashville.

In this facility we receive large donations of food from the food industry, and to supplement this food we purchase co-op products – staples like peanut butter, canned chili, cereal, canned fruit, etc.

Our service area includes 46 counties – all of Middle Tennessee and a portion of West Tennessee. We operate a rural delivery system that goes out to all areas of our service area each month. Partner agencies meet the Second Harvest truck at a central location to pick up their food orders.

Second Harvest's vision of ending hunger is more important than ever. Hunger is a big problem, and it cannot be solved without everyone's help. There are 35 million Americans deemed by the government to be food insecure, and there are more than 8 million children receiving food assistance. In Middle Tennessee alone, 47% of the people Second Harvest serves are children.

Why Start a Backpack Program?

A Backpack program is a great way to get food directly into the hands of children who need it. In Tennessee, 23 percent of all children live in food insecure households, which means they do not always know where they will find their next meal. Tennessee has the 7th highest rate of child food insecurity in the nation. In addition, more than half of Tennessee students, about 494,612, qualified for a free or reduced-price program last year.

A child who is unequipped 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.

Identify Schools or Programs You Plan 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?

Second Harvest started the Backpack Program in two rural communities that have limited access to other assistance programs. 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.

In 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.

Establish your budget

Account for food costs, delivery charges, plastic bags to pack food, administrative time and then any other miscellaneous costs. It costs Second Harvest about \$3 per pack of food, including the food cost and transportation.

What About funding?

Before starting a Backpack program, you will 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.

Evaluate Your Food 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 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 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 the 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. Second Harvest's Dietitian has 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

Second Harvest's standard BackPack contains the following or similar:

1 small pop top can pasta o's with beef

1 small pop top can chili

1 100% fruit juice box

1 Shelf stable chocolate milk box

1 applesauce

1 fruit cup

2 boxes cereal

Other nutritious snacks, such as peanut butter crackers or granola bars

Develop Paperwork

We made a handbook for the BackPack program to give to the principal, school counselors, and others helping with the program. This is very helpful and it gave a brief overview of how the program works. In addition you may want to make a notebook containing all the essential paperwork for your program. This notebook stays with the BackPack Program coordinator, and includes the BackPack Handbook, Program Agreement, Coordinator Responsibilities, Monthly Report, and Sample Letter to Parents.

Delivery

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 deliver either a one, two or four week supply of food. 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.

Testimonials

The following are two testimonials from participating BackPack schools.

“The program worked great for us. The children’s eyes would really light up when I delivered the bags and the teachers reported positively as well.”

“I cannot tell you how much we are enjoying the Backpack Program! I feel like Santa every Friday. The cafeteria ladies have really gotten into it, and the Title 1 coordinator and I have great fun. The kids are thrilled and appreciative. This is probably the most “fun” thing I have had a chance to do in a long time! Thank you so much!”

Parental Permission

Second Harvest leaves the decision of parental permission to participate in the Backpack program up to each individual school or organization participating 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.

Sample Letter to Parents/Guardians

Dear Parents/Guardians:

We are happy to tell you that your child is part of a new program this year called the Backpack Program. This program is offered through Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee, Inc. If you choose to allow your child to participate, he/she will receive a food pack of nutritional food items every Friday during the school year. The food is at no cost to your child.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact the school’s Backpack Coordinator, _____ at _____. If you choose to allow your child to participate in the program, please let us know how the Backpack Program is working for you and your family.

- I want my child to join the Backpack Program.
- I do not want my child to join the Backpack Program.

Parent / Guardian Signature

Date

Following is some advice for the Backpack program. Let us make a disclaimer and say that every Food Bank is different and every Program Coordinator is different, so what didn't work for us may work for you.

DO have 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.

Second Harvest's Backpack program targets food insecure children. School staff, teachers, and counselors identify children that they feel are not getting enough food at home to participate in the Backpack program. 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.

Food Insecure: If a child does not get enough food outside of school he/she is 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 basic needs of all their members because of insufficient money or other resources.* When the guardian of a child has to choose between food and other necessities, e.g., having electricity shut off because they don't have enough money, it is an indicator of food insecurity. Any child who is food insecure should be considered a candidate for receiving a Backpack.

DO 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 Backpack 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.

DO have 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 the Backpacks to the children.

DO 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.

DO decide about food for siblings. In our program we 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. We 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.

DO decide about using BackPacks. Second Harvest's BackPack program provides food in a plastic bag, to be put in the child's own backpack. Teachers and counselors distribute food discreetly to each participating child. Some food banks distribute the food in a standard backpack. However, we decided against a standard backpack so that participating children are not singled out or identified as "needy."

DO 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 we provide a notebook and guidelines for each school, we 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.

Overall, be as thorough as possible, network, make it as easy as possible for the schools, keep in good contact with the schools, take time to observe, listen, and get input from all aspects of the program!

Endnote: There are many ways to administer a BackPack program. The way we have organized our program may not be functional for your organization. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that our goal should be to **help bring a solution to childhood hunger**, specifically on the weekend. With that in mind, determine how you can reach the largest amount of children, and what types of food will be most beneficial for them. Finally, if your area already has an organization that interacts with children and has the capacity to coordinate efforts with you, then by all means, work with them!

There is no “right” way to organize a Backpack program, so be creative, innovative and always be adaptable to assure that the needs of the children are being met. This is your outlet to impact the lives of children - make it your own and have fun!

If you have additional questions about starting a Backpack program, please feel free to contact Whitney Cowles, Associate Director of Program Services, at 615-627-1587 or Whitney@secondharvestmidtn.org