

## Feeding America Program Staff Spotlight - October 2010



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### **Can you tell me a little about your Backpack Program?**

We started our program in 2004 with just 50 backpacks at one school and now our program currently distributes 2,508 backpacks to 70 schools in Southeast Nebraska. We have 28 sites including the Food Bank where packing takes place. Our volunteers pack one of our 6 menus into plastic sacks, place those sacks into tubs and then the tubs get transported to the schools. The bags are then handed out and

placed into children's backpacks on Fridays. We estimate that we have over 250 volunteers working each week to make sure that hungry children and their families are receiving their weekly backpacks.

One thing that is unique about our program is that we try to serve the family as opposed to doing individual packs. We do regular sized boxes of cereal, boxes of macaroni and cheese, full sized cans of fruit and vegetables, tuna with tuna helper, pancake mix along with vouchers for bread, eggs and milk.

### **Do you have any advice about how to successfully work with schools to implement the Backpack Program?**

Find a school champion that has the passion to help drive this program, communicate consistently with school staff, minimize the amount of work that school staff needs to do and take the time to build a relationship with administration (i.e. school board, superintendents, etc).

### **Can you describe a challenge you have had operating the Backpack Program and how you overcame it?**

A challenge we have had with our program is having so many packing sites! This is a tough part of the program, but we have worked really hard to figure out the logistics to ensure each site gets the food they need to pack. Our warehouse staff has been a key part in this. Having a supportive warehouse team that can pull product and get it to the sites is a must. We have also come up with specific delivery dates so sites can expect when we will be out in their area. The benefit of having a church being a packing site far outweighs having the church volunteers coming to the Food Bank to pack. This has also built consistent and committed donors within our volunteer base.

### **Can you share a story from someone who works with the program or benefits from your services?**

We have heard many stories about the Backpack Program to know the effect that this program has on our families. We recently received this email from one of our Backpack Principals.

*We have a family of 5. Two of the children are older and attend Goodrich. One of the children is at Belmont. Both parents live in the home. Dad moves from job to job but finds himself out of a job frequently. This is a highly mobile family, they move frequently. Mom knew me because she had been at Clinton when I was there. She came in about a month ago crying that she just found out she had cervical cancer. She was going to have surgery soon. She was worried about keeping food on the table for the family during her illness. I shared with her that we had the Backpack Program and she could go to the Food Pantry. She shared she hadn't signed up for the Backpack Program before because she thought others had greater needs but she signed up on this day. She also took a Food Pantry card for 5 visits. I know that this program has helped this family through a difficult time. We are thankful we had it to offer her in her time of need.*

### **What's the favorite part of your job?**

My favorite part of this job is knowing the simple fact that over 2,500 students and their families will have food over the weekend and that means one less thing for them to have to worry about. I think it's easy to lose sight of what we are actually accomplishing because the need is so much greater than what we are serving. It seems like all we hear is how many more are hungry, but we can't focus on that. At the end of the day we have to realize that we helped 2,500 kids and their families have something to eat over the weekend. When I think about that, it's the best part of my job.

### **If you could describe your typical day with one word what would it be?**

Humbling

### **What advice do you have for new program staff at food banks around the network?**

To build relationships with school staff - find a champion in the school, make the work that schools have to do minimal, find packing sites or volunteers from churches as these are the best volunteers and have committed donors, and be an advocate for hungry children - never give up or lose sight that one child receiving a backpack is one less hungry child over the weekend. Lastly, communicate, communicate, communicate!

### **Other than operating the Backpack Program, is there something you are looking forward to this Fall?**

The fall weather which means opening the windows, watching the leaves turn colors and wearing sweatshirts!

