

BEGINNING A FOOD BACKPACK MINISTRY

1. Identify the school where you want to start a backpack food program.

A helpful way to learn more about the need in your community is to find out how many children in a school qualify to receive free or reduced-priced school meals (Title 1 schools). Go to your county school website to access schools that are Title 1.

2. Schedule a meeting with the principal or counselor of the school.

Your program will be run by volunteers, so let the principal or counselor know that the school staff will not have any added responsibilities. Also, the Privacy Act is very important, so no child will be identified as a participant in your program.

3. Make a budget, including all the resources and materials you will need.

Once you understand the needs of the school and the resources you have, begin planning the details of your program. Begin to answer these questions:

- a. How many children will probably be involved in your backpack food program?
- b. The school will send out a permission slip to parents whose children are chosen for the program. Who will write and photocopy the permission slip (and how much will it cost to make copies)?
- c. How and where will you pack the food?
- d. What day of the week will you pack the food bags? Many churches pack the food bags on Wednesday night, along with their usual mid-week activities.
- e. What day of the week will you distribute the food bags? Volunteers usually distribute the bags on Thursdays. Thursdays are best in case there is a problem you need to solve before the bags are given to the students on Friday.
- f. Are you going to distribute additional food for times when the school is closed for a few days (holidays, spring break, etc.). Discuss this option with the school.

4. Find volunteers and begin fundraising.

There are many resources you will need to have before you begin your program. They include food, large containers, bags, a dolly or cart, and storage space. Food will likely be the largest cost for your program. Sometimes the food you want may not be available every time you go to the grocery store, so try to keep enough food for three to five weeks.

Each bag should cost \$2.00 to \$3.00. One bag full of healthy food for one child can easily be made for \$2.50 each week.

Example:

$\$2.50 \times 10 \text{ students} = \25.00 each week.

$\$25.00 \text{ per week} \times 36 \text{ weeks per year} = \$900.00 \text{ each year for 10 students.}$

Bags: Choose a type of bag to distribute the food in. One bag is needed for every child, each week.

- **Plastic shopping bags or ziplock bags** work well because they are easy to collect, and the child doesn't have to return the bag the following week.
- **Reusable bags** are better for the environment (but if children or families lose them, you may have to buy more). Washable bags with a drawstring work well. They can be put into the students' regular backpacks. Each student returns the bag on Monday to be reused. This can help teach the children responsibility. Some schools tell the children that if they do not return their bag, they will receive their food in a plastic bag. You might let the students keep their bags at the end of the year if they have returned their bags regularly.

Find volunteers

A strong, dependable group of volunteers is essential to keep your program organized and successful. **The head volunteer's** responsibilities include finding more volunteers, coordinating the transportation and delivery of food to the school, and fundraising. The head volunteer works with teachers and counselors to learn when children who receive food leave the school and when new children join the school. He (or she) communicates with the school administration, staff, and teachers about the program. He keeps track of how well the program is working at a school. He also coordinates events to raise money. **Other volunteers** pack the food bags and deliver them to the children each week. These volunteers should plan to help for about one hour per week. They could easily take turns, depending on when and how often they can be available.

5. Plan your food bags and buy food.

Once you have information about the number of children you will serve and the community resources, you can plan the food bag and buy food. Your local food bank may already have a weekend program; if so, ask if you could coordinate with their program. Each program provides different amounts of food items, depending on its budget. Here is one suggested list:

- 2 breakfast options (instant oatmeal/grits, cereal bar, Pop-Tart)
- 2 entrees (ravioli, Vienna sausages, tuna, soup, jerky sticks)
- 2 snacks (1 salty/1 sweet—crackers, cookies, fruit cup, granola bar, fruit gummies, cheese sticks; **avoid peanuts and peanut butter** unless you know that the children are not allergic to peanuts)
- 1 pasta (mac & cheese/Ramen noodles)
- juice box (100% juice recommended)

Things to consider:

Bag weight: Remember, children will have to carry these bags in addition to their book bags.

Packaging: Do not include foods in glass containers, because these could be a safety risk for the child. Whenever possible, use canned foods that do not require a can opener.

Person: Many times the child is the one who prepares the meal, because the parent is working.

Cooking supplies: Some families live in motels or do not have many kitchen supplies.

Food: Include foods that are ready to eat or require little to no cooking. The child may not have access to a kitchen, microwave, or stove.

Allergies: Find out if any of the children are allergic to certain foods.

6. Set a start date and begin.

Meet with the school principal and/or counselor and decide on a start date (usually a Thursday) to distribute your first bags.

Ask the counselor to send permission forms home to families (with information about the start date) and to encourage them to sign up.

Make a final schedule for volunteers to be sure they are ready to pack the bags the day before the start date.

Make an assembly line with your volunteers to package food.

Work with your counselor or school contact person to make sure they are able to give out the food bags on Friday or on the last day before break.

Continue this weekly schedule, working within the school's calendar.

7. Measure the success of your program.

After a few months of the program, look closely at how it is running. For example:

- Are you planning and working well with the school?
- Are you reaching all the children who need the program?
- Could you expand the program?
- Are the children enjoying and benefiting from the food?
- Are the volunteers enjoying their work?

Develop a way to measure the success of your program. Include a way to find out what the parents and teachers think about the program and how it is working.

EVALUATIONS:

Ask the teachers to informally survey their children about the program (while maintaining privacy). Encourage them to ask the children what their favorite foods have been in the bags, how easy it is to carry the bags home, and other questions about their experience with the program.

CONTINUE TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR SCHOOL

The program is only successful if you have the right information about the families and children you are serving and need to serve. Encourage the counselor to let you know when a child leaves the school or when a new child joins the school who may benefit from the program.

Measuring the success of your program helps you evaluate your impact on the school and children in your community. It also prepares you for writing grants or finding more money to keep your program running or to make it grow.

READY TO GET STARTED?

Pray! And then, here are **SEVEN STEPS FOR SUCCESS:**

1. Identify the school where you want to start a new backpack food program.
2. Schedule a meeting with the principal or counselor of the school you hope to serve.
3. Make a budget considering all of the resources and materials you will need for your program.
4. Find volunteers and begin fundraising.
5. Plan your food bags and buy food.
6. Set a start date and begin your program.
7. Measure the success of your program.

—Adapted from information from namb.net