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Humboldt County Case Study: **Backpacks for Kids Programs**

by Gwyn Mahony, CCRP Intern

The Backpacks for Kids program provides food to children who are at risk of going hungry over weekends and school vacations. These breaks from school present a particularly challenging situation for children who depend on food programs such as free and reduced lunch to meet their nutritional needs.

The Backpacks for Kids program seeks to fill this void and reduce the negative implications for a family without the means to meet their children's dietary needs. The negative behavioral and emotional consequences that are associated with hunger are also greatly reduced, which can lead to a more productive school environment and harmonious home.

By giving children backpacks filled with kid-friendly, easily prepared food items on Fridays, the Backpacks for Kids program helps prevent these children from going hungry.

According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report, *food insecure* households in the U.S. have increased to 14.6% in 2008 up from 11.1% in 2007, revealing a significant spike in families who are incapable of accessing enough food. Households reporting *very low food security* have also jumped to 5.7%, the highest that has ever been reported in the U.S.¹ In 2006, 11.9% of families with children living in the Redwood Coast Region (Del Norte, Humboldt, or Mendocino counties) reported *very low*

food security, however it is assumed that this number has also increased in more recent years.²

Based on these statistics and the tumultuous economic downturn of the last few years, it is not surprising that many children have become more dependent on meals provided by their schools.

Due to increasing food security problems both nationally and locally, programs such as the Backpacks for Kids model are needed for children and families who are struggling to meet nutritional needs.

In the fall of 2009 The California Center for Rural Policy organized a student internship to highlight regional programs addressing food security. This



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report seeks to portray both the successes and challenges of the Backpacks for Kids programs that have been implemented in Humboldt County. Increasing awareness is important for the growth and effectiveness of this type of program.

Throughout the program's history, the central role of local communities and passionate volunteers shows to be crucial for its success. The impact of assuring access to food on an individual's life is much broader than temporarily filling their stomachs. It has shown to increase their respect for and participation in their communities. Providing food to children is in every community's best interest, and lies at the core of the Backpacks for Kids program's mission.

Methods

The information for this report was obtained from four key informant interviews and review of the literature about local and national food security issues. Key informants were adults with knowledge about the Backpacks for Kids program in Humboldt County. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Humboldt State University.

Project Origins

The original Backpacks for Kids program was developed in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1995 by the Arkansas Rice Depot when a school nurse reported

students were regularly coming into her office complaining of hunger-induced symptoms such as stomachaches and dizziness.³ Although during the week many of the children were receiving school lunches, during the weekends many of them did not have access to adequate amounts of food. This caused not only physical problems, but also behavioral and emotional problems. With help from the school, the local food bank began providing needy kids with ready-to-eat, nutritious foods in backpacks to take home for the weekend.⁴

Programs based on this general concept have now been adopted in communities around the country to reduce the food insecurity that plagues so many children and families.

In 2006, Feeding America announced the Backpack Program as an official national program, and boasts feeding over 190,000 children around the country in 2009.⁵ The endorsement of Feeding America has inspired people to begin similar programs in their own communities and provided corporate financial support for many programs.

Humboldt County Program Overview

Almost every Backpacks for Kids program is unique in terms of how it is executed and organized.

Variables such as who provides the materials, who packs the backpacks, number of students receiving the backpacks, number of schools the filled backpacks are delivered to, and the selection criteria used for the recipients of the food, may be altered to best accommodate a community's resources and needs.

Locally, all of the programs maintain a similar organizational structure. For the purpose of this paper, the methods used by Food for People and the three Eureka Rotary Clubs for distribution of over 100 backpacks for Eureka area schoolchildren will be described.

John Bradley, a Eureka Rotary Club member, designed a schedule for the Backpack program that distributed the workload throughout the school year among members of his club. He broke the 10-month school year into 5, 2-month periods and appointed individuals who had volunteered as the team leaders for each segment. Each team leader would then sign people up to come help pack the backpacks once a



week for two months. The team leader holds responsibility for picking up the food and backpacks from the Food for People site, setting up the packing line, and designating helpers to drop off the backpacks on Fridays at the schools. The team leaders are the main responsible party for making sure the program goes off without a hitch for the two months they committed to the leadership position.

The food used in the backpacks is collected and organized at Food for People, and on Thursday evening the team leader will pick up the food from the Food for People building and take it to Humboldt Moving and Storage warehouse (which is owned by another Eureka Rotary Club member, who donated the space). About ten packers meet at the warehouse Thursday evenings and pack the backpacks and bags with food in an assembly line, and then load the filled bags into a specified car. Packing and loading the 100 backpacks with ten volunteers takes only about 20 minutes.

On Fridays, the designated drivers deliver the backpacks to each school before 2:00 pm, where school administrators and staff then distribute them to the children.

Some specifications are made for particular children in the program. For instance, if the school reports that one of the children has two siblings, then extra food items might be added. Also, if a child has not returned the backpack from the previous week, they will receive their food in a brown paper bag instead. If a school break is coming up, the bags will be packed with additional food to help them through the extra time away from school.

One goal of the Backpacks for Kids program is to provide kid-friendly foods that are easily prepared, but still maintain a high standard of nutritional value. Although the foods packed each week can differ based on what was donated by Food for People, some of the basics include: a loaf of bread, shelf-stable milk, granola bars, oatmeal, dried cranberries, raisins, canned soups, juices, peanut butter, canned tuna fish, crackers, and fruit cups.

The criterion used in selection of students to participate in the Backpack program is different for every school. All of the local programs, however, generally will ask teachers and other school employees to rec-

ommend students who could potentially benefit from the program. Then, the students' families will be delivered information about the program and invited to enroll their student(s). The program is based on need, but the schools generally use a self-qualification procedure and generally do not turn away applicants.

A child's need is generally well known by the individuals who work with them on a daily basis within the schools, so when a family is invited to participate it is because of known circumstances where food security is a definite problem.

Local Context

The Backpacks for Kids program has become an integral part of food aid for children in Humboldt County. It has been in effect for over three years, and various adaptations of the original program are currently helping hundreds of families within the region.

In 2006, Humboldt County's main food distributors, Food for People, helped spearhead the Backpack program and three Humboldt County schools began participating in the program. By the beginning of the 2009 school year, 11 schools in Redway, Fortuna, Eureka, Arcata, Blue Lake and Rio Dell had been enrolled in the program.⁶

Although originally the majority of the funding was coming from Feeding America funds given to Food for People, now every Backpack program is receiving funding from local Rotary and Soroptomist clubs, other service clubs, and foundations.



Funding is not guaranteed, but Food for People works hard to secure local funding sources from year to year.

The Backpack program has only undergone a few modifications locally, and for the most part has stayed true to its original structure. Besides the occasional use of brown paper bags instead of backpacks (due to children not returning their backpacks from the week prior), the organization, distribution, and overall purpose of the Backpacks for Kids programs have remained consistent with the Feeding America guidelines.

It is the program's applicability to almost any setting, whether it is rural or urban, small or large, that has made the backpack program a national success.

Program Collaborators

Although the Backpacks for Kids program is simple in terms of structure, it requires a great deal of organization to make it run smoothly throughout the school year. A good collaborative relationship between the people funding the program, donating the food, working at the school, and working with the children and families is key for a successful program.

Nationally, Feeding America is the main advocate of the program, and provides information and some funding to food banks that want to start a Backpack program in their community. Their endorsement of the program has increased public awareness about food security issues. For instance, the television show "American Idol" featured the program in their charity special, and corporate food producers have recently donated money and food to the program. A few celebrities have also endorsed the program.⁷

Feeding America's contribution may not be obvious within a community, but their activity in providing food, getting funding organized and distributed, and raising awareness has made local programs possible.

Food for People in Eureka is the main party responsible for providing backpacks, food, and raising funding through outreach efforts to the local programs. Originally, Food for People participated in

almost every aspect of the Backpack program, from food purchasing to backpack distribution.

Today, the packing and distribution of the backpacks has mostly been taken over by the local Rotary Clubs and Family Resource Center staff. In some situations, school affiliates will then further organize the backpacks by classroom, or personally distribute the bags to specific children.

Andy Nieto, the Child Nutrition Programs Coordinator at Food for People, coordinates with the Rotary members to get them food and backpacks each week. A few examples of local people who help within the schools include Georgeanne Pucillo, the principal of Alice Birney Elementary School, Kay Chapman at Fortuna South Elementary School, and Christina Huff at Redway Elementary School. All of them were key in getting the program into their respective school and help keep it running each week. Americorps also plays an important role at almost all of the sites.

John Bradley of the Eureka Rotary Club is a huge advocate of the program, and developed an organizational scheme for his fellow Rotary members to follow for the programs that they sponsor. He has also been making presentations to other Rotary and local business clubs (as well as clubs out of the area) about how they can get involved with the program.

Peter Connelly, the current president of the Garberville Rotary Club and local restaurant owner, brought the Redway School 'Weekend Food Program' to fruition by using his connections with food distributors and other community members.

There are countless other people who worked to make this program a success. Without the people and organizations mentioned above, Backpacks for Kids probably would not have come to Humboldt County or made the positive impacts that it has for the children of this county.

Challenges

There are two main challenges of the Backpack programs: one surrounds the stigma associated with food insecurity; the other is related to food quality. Other worries about the program include, the amount of food (i.e. whether it is enough for one child, or provides for all their siblings or other family mem-

bers), and the extra costs of providing backpacks for all of the children who qualify to participate in the program.

Local elementary schools reported from none to a few rumors of bullying. As one key informant from Alice Birney Elementary School (which has a 90% low and reduced lunch qualification rate⁸) said, “one thing that came up originally was whether there would be a stigma attached to the kids who take home the backpacks, but here it’s quite the opposite. The kids who get the backpacks are envied.”

This lack of discrimination among students could be due to the school’s high rate of free and reduced lunches. The large majority of the students participate in food aid programs, making them less likely to tease others.

Conversely, a key informant from Redway Elementary School did report rumors of bullying or teasing of children in the older grade levels who participate in the program. It was feared that this problem was leading to a decrease in families enrolling in the program, so this year the parents were asked to pick up the bags from the Healthy Start office. If this was not plausible for the families, the kids’ bags are put on their respective buses and given to the kids on their way off the bus.

Overall, schools have found ways around concerns, and do not feel that they are serious enough to undermine the help the program is providing.

Some people do not agree that the food provided meets high enough nutritional standards, specifically because of the lack of fresh fruits or vegetables, while others argue that it is better than the alternative.

The question of food quality in the Backpack program is controversial. Some people believe that any food is better than none, while others believe that providing children with food of low nutritional standards is unethical. Many local schools have found ways to integrate fresh fruits and vegetables into the curriculum. For instance, Alice Birney and Redway Elementary Schools participate in programs such as ‘Harvest of the Month,’ which introduces children to a new, fresh vegetable or fruit each month. Programs like this educate children about the importance

of fruits and vegetables in their diets, and teach kid-friendly, simple ways to prepare the foods.

Although this does not address the quality of the food provided in the backpacks, it does help supplement the children’s diets and knowledge about healthy eating habits. Due to the poor shelf life and high price of fresh fruits and vegetables, they are not ideal products for the Backpack program, but their importance in a well-rounded diet is nonnegotiable and hopefully is addressed elsewhere in the school’s curriculum.

Overall, the food that is provided through the Backpack programs helps protect children from hunger, and this necessity is unarguable.

Successes

The Backpacks for Kids program has had successes beyond its simple goal of providing food on the weekends and school holidays for children who might not have access to enough food. Prior to its induction into Humboldt County schools, most people were unaware of how much the population of low or no income families has grown in recent years, resulting in food insecurity.

As one key informant stated, “...the Rotarians were looking for a school that has a lot of low income students and it’s been an eye-opening experience for them. Although they are all very good, hard-working men and women, they had no idea that poverty is right here in their community and hungry kids live in their own town.”

This increase in awareness among community members has also led to more support of other food aid efforts.

Another key informant made the claim that since local Rotary clubs had gotten behind the backpack program Food for People had experienced more community support in the form of donations and volunteers. They said, “This was not due to a sudden warming of the heart it’s because there’s familiarity. [Rotary members] were involved in the backpack program and saw it working and so were then more interested in having a food drive at their office.”

For example, some of the Rotary members have had their coworkers help pack the backpacks or drop

off filled backpacks at the schools, which creates community involvement beyond the club members.

Another positive outcome expressed by one key informant, is that it gives children a positive impression about their community and the importance of school. She claims that children who were granted some aid from their immediate community grow up with increased amount of respect for their communities and feel more obligated to be active members of their society in their adulthood. Although this claim cannot be verified by statistics or studies, it is commonly believed that what children are taught in their early years can have a tremendous impact on their beliefs and actions in later years. Any program that demonstrates support for people in need could leave a lasting impression about charity and compassion for others.

Program Sustainability and Future Plans

The sustainability of the local Backpacks for Kids programs is based on the energy and funding available from local citizens.

The Eureka Rotary Club has committed to participating for three years. Although it is ideal for an already organized group to take on the responsibility, it is not completely necessary for this program's success. Many people believe that if one citizen took on a leadership role and organized enough people to help with the packing, driving and distribution, the funding and food could be provided from local businesses and citizens.

The hope of organizers is that groups such as Soroptomist, Kiwanis, and other local service clubs and businesses will assist with funding and adopt the model of volunteerism currently in place.

If a few local groups can commit to two or three years of service and funding for the programs, all the civic groups can rotate responsibilities for the program every few years. Some do not believe this idea will work. However, other citizen-based concepts are being discussed with Food For People.

School officials and Redway Family Resource Center staff have begun to organize efforts to create a system of community involvement, besides that of the Garberville Rotary Club, because of fluctuations in funding for the Redway School Program in 2009.

Although the details are not yet in place, this system would include a sign-up board at the school to take responsibility for certain aspects of the program, as well as a place to donate foods for the backpacks.

Sustainability is definitely within reach for these local programs. However, community initiative and volunteer help is needed to make Backpacks for Kids programs a permanent aspect of the local food assistance programs.



Join us online...

Please join us in an on-line discussion about Backpacks for Kids. Contribute to the living document by commenting on the research findings, sharing innovative programs and discussing policy implications. To read comments and post your own, please visit our website, www.humboldt.edu/~ccrp.

Join us in the community...

The California Center for Rural Policy will continue to share research results with the community through briefs, reports and meetings. We plan to engage the community in dialogue about potential solutions and policy recommendations to address identified problem areas. We hope you will join us as we work together to improve health in our region. If you would like to receive information please contact us to get on our mailing list: (707) 826-3400 or ccrp@humboldt.edu

Join us in collaboration...

CCRP welcomes opportunities to collaborate with community partners for more in-depth research on this topic.

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About the Author

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