

TIPS TO DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE BACKPACK PROGRAM

- 1) **Always start with a pilot and then grow it slowly-** It's always a good idea to start with a small pilot program within your school of choice, measure your expenses and then decide your capacity for expansion. Many backpack programs pilot with a "referral system" from teachers, where staff refer children they suspect of needing additional food to the backpack program. Although this is definitely an option, it is possible that some students who do not publicly display signs of hunger might also be in need of the resource. I recommend making it open to all children on free and reduced priced lunch, or those who are in need of the program, and to then control its growth by making it available to students based on the grade they are in (make it open to only kindergarteners and those in dire situations first and, then, as your program gets larger, opening enrollment to 1st graders, then to 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc.). Programs are typically nervous about people utilizing the program who don't really need it- to be honest, very few families will sign up for the service who do not need it, especially if parents are aware that the program has a limited enrollment. Although I encourage marketing the program to students on free or reduced priced lunch, be aware that some students who need the program might be above those income guidelines.

- 2) **Decide who/what you want to serve-** Deciding who you want to serve is the first step to a successful backpack program. This includes several factors, including narrowing down your scope to the school district you'd like to start your backpack program in and then to the school within that school district. Who you want to serve will also impact what you want to serve, regarding your aim for the pack- are you trying to provide the whole family with food for the weekend, or just the child? If you are planning on providing a pack to just the child, be aware that the child is likely to share, especially if they have siblings. If you are planning on providing a family pack, be aware that too much food can get heavy for children to carry. You should also decide whether you want to offer enough food for the entire weekend or just for some of the meals (for example, some programs are "breakfast packs").

- 3) **Budget-** Once you have decided who/what you want to serve, you will better be able to budget for the coming year. Budgeting is extremely important when approaching a backpack program because you definitely don't want to over-offer the program and then not be able to follow through on the backpack program's commitment to the students later in the year. The food for each backpack usually runs around \$4-5 a backpack if it is just a kid's pack and covers every meal over the weekend. It actually costs a little less to offer a family pack. Before you start the program each year, make sure you have a budget for the program which takes into account every expense you might need to make.
 - Some programs choose to use direct food donations as opposed to receiving monetary donations. This is definitely an option; however, utilizing food donations is actually more expensive in the long run and will not allow your program to expand as much and be as sustainable as utilizing monetary donations and buying in bulk.

- 4) **Think logistics and integrity-** Logistics might seem like minimal factors to the success of the program, but might become major if there is a hiccup or misunderstanding between your organization and the school or if packs don't get delivered because of an internal miscommunication. Make sure you have worked out all the logistics of the program and clearly delineated your organization's responsibilities, the school's responsibilities and any partner organization's responsibilities. When contemplating logistics, it is always worthwhile to create a focus on maintaining the integrity of the student. Depending on the school, some students will be proud to receive the pack, while some will be extremely embarrassed to be getting free food. Feeling less privileged than other students can impact low-income students' experience with the backpack program, but it can also impact their self-perception and self-esteem in a very real and lasting way.

- 5) **Bring in partners-** It is always important to partner with the school you would like your backpack program to run through, and I usually encourage people starting programs to partner with their local food shelf as well. Doing so allows programs to get a lot more product for a lot less money, allowing them to greatly expand their program. Another option is to encourage a community partner to becoming an agency of Second Harvest. This will allow your partner, on your behalf to buy in bulk can cut your food costs significantly. As a note, having a connection or a positive relationship with a community food shelf can serve as a good referral point for children after the school year has ended.

- 6) **Market your program-** Backpack programs are typically expensive, at \$4-5 dollars a pack each week; however, they can be economically viable because they are very popular with local groups, community organizations, faith based organizations and individual donors. Marketing your program doesn't mean taking out TV ads or creating a whole fundraising team, it can be as simple as asking local organizations to spread the word about your program and to donate in order to aid in its expansion. When marketing your program, it is always important to keep the focus on what you are doing: feeding kids in need. Such programs are appealing to people who want to impact the youth in their community.

- 7) **Be open to the idea of expansion-** As your program grows and becomes more and more successful, I encourage programs not to close themselves off to the idea of possible expansion. Expansion might mean within the school, within the school district, within the town or within the county. Whether it's 3 years down the road or 10 years down the road, your program might gain the momentum that would make expansion possible. This can be a daunting process; however, recording the steps you take now can make expansion much easier in the future and will make it possible for you to impact a larger scope of children.