

**Starting a Backpack Feeding Program
Suggestions and Ideas from Micah's Backpack
August 2015**

While Micah's Backpack effectively serves the needs of children and youth from low-income families in Blacksburg, we know hungry students live in communities all over our commonwealth and country who would benefit from a backpack-feeding program. We developed this document to share some of the lessons we have learned over the last seven years. We hope it will make it easier for new groups to get started.

Micah's Backpack began with a few passionate people, a partner school and an initial source of funding. At our interest meeting, we gathered a group of 6 people to discuss the possibility of starting a program. From that meeting, we established our school partner, who would be responsible for buying the food, packing, and delivering the backpacks. We also determined how many backpacks we thought we could afford to deliver through the end of the school year.

Based on a cost estimate of \$10 per backpack per weekend, we decided to start with 5 backpacks at one local school. The school identified the children, their families signed a permission slip, and then we started delivering. You may access forms like the permission slip online at <http://micahsbackpack.org/starting-a-program/> and adapt them to suit your needs.

We always advise groups to start small and then build up to meet the need. Starting small gives you the opportunity to work out the details and make sure you have solid financial and volunteer support in place before you commit to a large number of students. We started with 5 students at one school in November 2008; we now deliver 290 backpacks to our 7 public schools and 3 income-based preschools.

Initially, we used grant money from a group called Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. Later we looked to individuals, interfaith, and civic organizations to sponsor backpacks for a weekend, semester, or year. We found that people were more than happy to give to a program that made a direct, positive impact on the lives of students. Plenty of businesses, civic clubs, community foundations, and interfaith groups want to help with backpack feeding programs. When you check around you will probably be able to find an organization or individual with seed money to help you start.

It is extremely helpful to partner with a local non-profit group so they can handle the financial donations and the tax receipts. If you don't have a non-profit partner, you will need to apply for a 501c3 non-profit status with the IRS so that donations can be tax deductible. It's much easier to recruit a local church to partner with you than to start a 501c3, but if you think this is going to be a large program, it may be worth looking into creating your own non-profit.

When we started we used actual backpacks, but today we use doubled grocery bags and our partner schools place the grocery bags in the students' existing backpacks. This change has streamlined the program and works well. We have developed different packing systems as the program has grown. Currently, volunteers carry the doubled bag around in a circle and pick up food items from a series of tables. You can get a sense of the packing system from pictures on our website: www.micahsbackpack.org and from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldGn8lBrlvs>.

At first, we worked with a local grocery store to purchase the food and asked for donations of specific items. We now purchase food from multiple sources including the grocery store (they give us a case discount), a warehouse store, a food distributor, and our local food bank. These days, we spend between \$4 and \$6 per backpack. Based on what we have learned in talking to others programs, we provide a little more food than many groups, but it works well in our context.

Our bags contain 15 food items and an educational piece. Nutrition students at Virginia Tech help us fine-tune our menu. We aim to send home the most nutritional, shelf-stable, and easy to prepare food available. We rotate items to offer variety. Student interns have developed and tweaked our educational pieces that provide fun activities on healthy eating.

We lowered the cost per bag by working with individuals and partner groups to conduct food drives. The most helpful food drives happen outside of a local grocery store. We call these clean food drives. The food comes straight from the shelves to your program and customers shop for the items on a list that you use in your program. Also food drives engage club members and raise community awareness while offering a great way to partner. Additionally food drives may be held during a club meeting, in a neighborhood canvas, or at an event.

As a best practice, we send timely thank you notes and develop relationships with individuals and donor groups. We supplement the thank you letters with monthly email reports via a free service describing the program's accomplishments with data and photographs. We feel strongly that a thank you should not be accompanied by a request for additional funding. At times, people we thank make another donation and our goal with our thank you notes is to let donors know that we genuinely appreciate their help. We also send thank you letters semi-annually to the school staff who facilitate bag distribution, delivery volunteers, and to individuals or groups who craft food drives for us.

For us, building a partnership with community groups and businesses has been key. We have about 200 community partners who work with Micah's Backpack and a fluid team of people who pack each Thursday night for about an hour including tons of students from Virginia Tech. If there is a college or university in your area, reach out to their student engagement office and nutrition or human development departments. Many

campus groups appreciate volunteer opportunities and happily get involved in a program that provides food to students.

We encourage volunteering for individuals, the young and young-at-heart, academic, civic, collegiate, and interfaith groups. We don't take attendance and welcome sprinters, marathoners, and everyone in between.

Once a year we conduct a phone and email survey of the parents or guardians of our participants. This interaction provides valuable feedback about what works well and what needs improvement. This stakeholder information should help guide the structure and content of your backpack program.

If you have questions, feel free to connect with Jennie Hodge (jennie@micahsbackpack.org) who serves as the director of Micah's Backpack and oversees all areas of the program. Pastor John Wertz (pastorjohn@stmlc.us) is the pastor of St. Michael Lutheran Church, the sponsor Micah's Backpack.