

# BACKPACK MINISTRY

WEEKEND FOOD FOR  
UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN





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**FOR UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN**

Dennis Garcia knows what it's like to be hungry. He grew up in a family in poverty, dependent upon food stamps for food. Sometimes, his parents traded the food stamps for drugs. Most times, Dennis and his siblings didn't have enough food. Sometimes, they had none.

Dennis is now pastor of The People Church in Moriarty, New Mexico. When he realized that children in his community were experiencing the same issues he had as a child, he reached out to the local school district to ask how they could help.

Sue Gibson, the school liaison, told him "On Mondays, we have hungry, sick children. They come to school so hungry that they over-eat for breakfast and then throw up. Some of them are so hungry, they can't eat."

Dennis' church began to partner with nearby Mountain Valley Church to provide backpacks stocked with food to take home on the weekends. Yearly, the program meets the needs of 30-45 underprivileged children. As a result, the students' academic performance, attendance and grades are improving dramatically.

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Many school-age children are dependent upon breakfast and lunch programs at school to have anything to eat. But, on weekends and holidays, there's very little, if any food at home. According to Feeding America, one out of every five children (and one of every seven adults) lack proper food at least part of the year. That means more than 42 million people, or 8.1 million families in America, are without enough food every day! No matter where your church is located, hungry children, adults and families are nearby and need your help.

<sup>1</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/financial-condition-and-health-care-burdens-people-deep-poverty>.



# Childhood Hunger In America

- Hunger exists in every county in the United States.<sup>1</sup>
- Over 21 million children receive free or reduced-price lunches at school, and about half of these receive free breakfast as well.<sup>2</sup>
- On weekends, holidays and summers, when schools are not in session, 18 million children have few, if any, meals.<sup>3</sup>
- Three-fourths of American teachers see the impact of childhood hunger in their classrooms.
- Children who are consistently hungry have lower academic progress, more sickness (along with stomachaches, headaches, depression, and anxiety) and more behavioral problems.<sup>4</sup>
- Children from families who are food insecure are more likely to drop out of school before graduation than those who have enough food to eat.<sup>5</sup>
- Those who were hungry in childhood tend to be less successful as adults, creating a cycle that passes along the issues of hunger, poverty and lack of success to the next generation.<sup>6</sup>
- One out of every four children in the United States receives food stamps — that's over 20 million children.<sup>7</sup>

1 Katie Dupere, "6 startling facts about child hunger in the U.S.—and how you can help," [www.mashable.com](http://www.mashable.com).

2 Dupere.

3 Dupere.

4 Kym Klass, "Project 7: How one woman's ministry aims to reduce hunger in schools," *Montgomery Advertiser*, p. 2; available online at <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com>.

5 Dupere.

6 Klass, p. 2.

7 Klass, p. 2.



## Discover the Needs in your Community

Before you begin any new ministry, it is important to first take time to discover and understand the unique needs within your community. Explore the physical community, listen to and learn from people living and working in the area and seek God's guidance by prayer-driving and prayer-walking the neighborhood.

*If you find that serving hungry children is a need in the community, keep reading! We have practical steps to help you get started.*

To learn more about how to identify needs in your community, download [\*How Can We Serve? An In-Depth Guide to Discovering Community Needs.\*](#)

If not, [check out some of our other ministry guides](#) for opportunities that fit for your church's gifting and community's needs.



# Strategically Considering Ministry Opportunities

Take the next step by enlisting a small group of people within your congregation to assess ministry opportunities by working through the following questions:

- **What partnerships in your community can you utilize to meet this need?** These could include government officials, school officials and teachers, other community churches and leaders, local food banks or other preestablished hunger-relief programs.
- **Who in your church is passionate and equipped to lead or participate in this ministry?** Consider children's ministry workers, parents, families, teenagers or youth groups, Sunday school classes, senior adults and more.
- **What resources has God given your church to support this ministry?** Consider missions offerings, grants, those with the gift of couponing and other financial resources.
- **What space can be used for collecting donations, storing food and filling backpacks?** Consider unused classrooms, closets or members' homes that can provide space and secure, dry storage.

**These questions can lead this small group of local missionaries to determine whether or not:**

1. There is a desire within the congregation to meet this need.
2. There are resources of people, space and money to meet this need.
3. This ministry is sustainable over time.
4. You feel God leading you as a congregation in this direction.

# STARTING A FOOD BACKPACK MINISTRY



Use these eight steps as a guide as you get started:

- 1. Identify the school where you want to start a new backpack food program.** Find out how many children in the school qualify to receive free or reduced-price school meals. (Look for schools designated as Title 1 schools, which are schools with large concentrations of low-income students.)
- 2. Schedule a meeting with the principal or counselor of the school.** Let the principal or counselor know that school staff will have no added responsibilities and that no child will be publicly identified as a participant in the program because of the Privacy Act. Discuss sending out a permission slip to each potential participant, or ask if the school would like to maintain and facilitate that list. Obtain a copy of the school's official calendar.
- 3. Assess available community resources.** Research established and on-going community ministries to determine what is already being done and what resources are needed. Talk to directors of food banks, women and family shelters, churches involved in meeting the needs of hunger for indigent families and local grocery stores to identify resources available and programs already working in the community. Evaluate programs to determine if what is already in place will meet the ministry needs you've identified. Consider how you could join these programs to meet your ministry goals.
- 4. Make a budget of all the resources and materials you need—both for launch and maintenance.**  
Answer each of these questions:
  - Based on the information received from the school, how many children will likely be involved?
  - Develop an itemized budget, that includes: food, large containers, bags, a dolly or cart and storage space. Keep in mind that food will likely be the largest cost for your program, so try to keep enough food on hand for three to five weeks. Each bag of food should cost \$2-4. Example: \$2.50 x 10 students = \$25.00 each week; \$25.00 per week x 36 weeks per year = \$900 each year for 10 students. Bags to use for food distribution can be backpacks or plastic shopping bags, which do not have to be returned. What partnerships did you identify in step 3 above that could help offset costs?
  - Who will write and photocopy the permission slip for the school to distribute? How much will copies cost?
  - Where will you acquire backpacks?

- How will you pay for food? (Possibilities: church budget, donations, grants, church-wide love offerings, fundraising, corporate donations, grocery store donations.)
- How will the food be obtained? (Purchased by volunteers, donations of food, etc.)
- If you're going to distribute additional food for times when the school is closed for extended breaks, add that to the budget, and discuss with the school.

## 5. **Develop your process.**

- Enlist Ministry Leader(s) with responsibilities to: (1) enlist additional volunteers; (2) develop relationship with school officials; (3) establish process for food collection, storage, and backpack assembly; (4) coordinate transportation and delivery of backpacks to school; (5) keep records of when students move away from or to the district.
- Determine where you will stockpile food stuffs. Consider setting up shelving units in closets and/or empty rooms at church, or other designated, limited access places.
- Determine what day of the week you will pack and deliver food bags. (Some churches pack the food bags on Wednesday night, along with their usual mid-week activities; others load and deliver backpacks to schools on Thursdays, so teachers can put food bags into recipients' backpacks on Fridays.)
- Enlist additional volunteers who can: (1) commit 1-2 hours a week to ministry; (2) pack the backpacks and deliver them to the school each week; and (3) assist ministry leader(s) as needed with other tasks.

6. **Collect food.** Many churches have success by asking church members to donate food items. Provide a list of needed items, and begin collecting food in the spring for distribution at the beginning of the school year. Two weeks before the school year begins, inventory food items received, and purchase needed items using monetary donations. Suggested items per week per student:

- **2 Breakfasts:** instant oatmeal/grits, cereal bar, Pop-Tart
- **2 Entrees:** ravioli, Vienna sausages, tuna, soup, jerky sticks
- **2 Snacks:** crackers, cookies, fruit cups, granola bars (avoid peanuts and peanut butter)
- **1 Pasta:** macaroni and cheese, Ramen noodles
- **Juice boxes:** 100% juice recommended

Things to consider:

- The weight of the bag since children will be carrying items home
- The packaging of the food— Do not include foods in glass containers; Do use pop-tops cans
- Available appliances and utensils to children

7. **Set a start date, and begin.** Set the start date (usually a Thursday) with the principal or counselor at the school. Provide permission slips to be sent home to families (with information about the start date) to encourage families 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. After bags are packed, deliver them to the school on Thursday

to be sent home in children's backpacks on Friday. Continue this weekly schedule, working within the school's calendar and making adjustments as requested by school administrators.

**Take note:** There might be times in the school calendar when the children will not have access to a food backpack for an extended period of time. Times like this include spring break or extended holidays. You might consider packing more food than you typically do for these periods of time.

8. **Evaluate the program's success.** After two months, closely review how successful the program has been with the following questions:

- Is the program running smoothly? Why or why not?
- What problems were you unprepared for? What are solutions for these issues?
- How good is the relationship with the school administration and teachers? What can you do to strengthen relationships within the school?
- Do you feel you have successfully identified the students who need help? Do you feel some students who should be in the program have been overlooked?
- Could you expand the program to include more students or additional schools? What would that take?

## What Next?

This is your opportunity to start meeting a huge need in your community...one child and one backpack at a time.

Take your next step on mission with Send Relief by not only helping your immediate neighborhood with backpacks, but also traveling to communities around the world who need your help! Learn more about Send Relief mission trips and get started today at [SendRelief.org/Trips](https://SendRelief.org/Trips).



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