



The Back Pack Program – A Step Toward Ending Childhood Hunger in Montana

We are passionate about ending child hunger in Montana. The Back Pack (BP) program is in perfect alignment with our mission, which is to eliminate hunger in Montana through food acquisition and distribution, education and advocacy. The Back Pack Program is a labor of love and one that all of the Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) staff members take particular pride and joy in. The Back Pack Program is an integral part of who we are as an organization, rather than simply one of the activities that we do.

MFBN's Board of Directors and Food Security Council both identified the problem of childhood hunger in its long-range plan and implemented the BP program to address the needs of hungry children, by placing food directly into their outstretched hands. There are no hassles, no questions, no charges and no stigma attached to receiving the food and every child in the household receives food regardless of whether or not they attend school or are in other grades than the child bringing home the food. The dignity of the children is upheld, not just by the discretion in the way the program is administered, but also in the simple validation of their genuine need.

Chronically hungry children cannot explore their passions or develop to their full potential, much less enjoy their fleeting childhood. They experience hunger as perhaps the most unfair and cruelest of life's hard lessons. Their eyes reveal bewilderment at their terrible predicament, as their tiny fingers reach out for life's most basic human need- food.

The truth is, 85% of Montana children are at risk of hunger and live between 100 to 185% of the Federal poverty level. There is a dreadful gap on the weekends when children are not receiving the school breakfast and lunch programs they depend upon. To the best of our knowledge, the Back Pack Program is unique. There are no other programs that are meeting the urgent need our children have for food on the weekends, on a statewide basis. Other states have implemented the Back Pack Program and Montana is just coming on board. Many, many communities have expressed interest, have put in place the infrastructure required and are ready to launch.

Principals, counselors, teachers and many other collaborators agree that this program is highly effective and fills a critical need. It is our goal to assure that no child is hungry over the weekend and during school holidays. This program should be expanded into every school in Montana.