

## From Backpacks to Snack-Sacks

Programs throughout the Country Serve Weekend Meals to Kids in Need

Children who are homeless or who qualify for free school meals are not always eating plentiful or nutritious meals over the weekend. They arrive at school on Monday tired and hungry, learning being

are stuffed into 1,000 backpacks by the Orange County, California-based We've Got Your Back (WGYB) program created by Giving Children Hope. A program exclusively geared toward providing homeless children with a stable and nutritious source of food during the weekends, WGYB distributes backpacks each week to students in 24 schools from eight different school districts. To help eliminate the stigma of receiving free food, the program is presented to the children as a weekend nutrition club and an activity sheet related to nutrition is included in each backpack.

Another program based out of the Food Bank of Lincoln, Nebraska, delivers 2,513 backpacks each week to elementary students in Lincoln public and parochial schools, as well as 16 rural communities in Southeast Nebraska. The food menu changes on a weekly basis, providing children and their families with a variety of meals and snacks. Last school year a Lincoln middle school and a community high school joined the program. Initially, food bank officials were concerned older students would not accept the food, but their fears were soon allayed when the backpacks were taken within minutes.

The Food For Kids Backpack Program in Denver, Colorado, was more of a grassroots effort. During the 2009–10

school year, parents of Denver's Montclair Elementary School stood around the hallways on Fridays to hand out ramen noodles and other microwavable foods. Just one year later, a donation of ten tons of groceries from Whole Foods Market and \$50,000 from the Quest Foundation, has kicked the program up a notch. Now, spaghetti and sauce, fresh bread, tuna, and canned vegetables are on the menu for over 1,450 of Denver's homeless students each weekend.

In San Bernardino County, California, the homeless program specialist, Brenda Dowdy, takes an active roll in the Kidz Fuel-Snack Pack Program. Dowdy refers students to participate in the program, making sure the food goes to the children who need it most. And the program has turned into a community affair with adults with developmental disabilities from Social Vocational Services, high school students, school administrators, and city government employees among the San Bernardino volunteers that help each week to fill 1,095 backpacks with nutritious food.

Improved health, better attendance, and increased academic success are just a few outcomes of backpack programs, and now weekends that used to be spent hungry and tired are turned into enjoyable days off from school. ■



the last thing on their minds. To combat this problem, more and more schools throughout the country are initiating a Friday afternoon "backpack program," where students receive a weekend's worth of food in a backpack. The backpack is key; there is nothing unusual about taking a backpack home from school, however a shopping bag with produce sticking out might turn a few heads and cause embarrassment. Over 3,600 backpack programs served more than 190,000 children during the 2008–09 school year and the number of programs is growing.

Six meals for a family of up to four

*Above: An elementary student leaves school on a Friday afternoon with a backpack full of food thanks to the We've Got Your Back Program. Right: The Kidz Fuel-Snack Pack Program provides backpacks that include items such as those pictured—from healthy breads and fresh fruit to sources of protein like canned tuna and beans.*

