

Starting a child Backpack (e.g. meal pack) Program



Guide for organizations providing weekend food to children in need

Thank you for your interest in starting a child meal pack program! We hope you will find this to be a very rewarding program to benefit the children in your community. The food back program is a partnership between the school administration and the organization responsible for preparing the meal packs. The following are some suggestions and best practices to help make your program successful.

Identify Schools or Programs You Plan to Serve

Do you have a school or an after-school program in your area that has a need for the child meal pack program? Have you already made contact with school personnel and determined the need?

In getting started it is important that you don't do too much too soon. A meal pack program can be very expensive, set your goals accordingly. Begin in the schools where you know the need is great and where the principal and staff are in full support of the program.

You and your partner school should consider:

- Number of children you can consistently support.
- What grades will participate? Middle School and High School are harder to reach but still have great need. *A school pantry may be a better solution for older grades.
- Determine student eligibility. Do these students have siblings? If so, you will address this additional need?
- Parental permission. There are two effective ways to sign up children for your program, effective programs utilize both methods.
 1. Opt In: A letter is sent home to parents describing the program and providing parents with a tear-off form to fill out and return to the school office. This letter should be distributed to families about two weeks before you hope to start your program.
 2. Opt Out: Provide meal packs to school, teachers will identify students who they think would benefit from the program and send a meal pack home with the children. Include a Letter to Parents with the first bag. DO NOT tell the parents their teacher recommended their child to the program as it could create a difficult situation for the teacher and child.

Develop Paperwork

You may wish to create a hand-out giving a brief overview of how the program works. This is helpful for parents, school administration, teachers and other stakeholders including program donors.

Record keeping

- meal pack coordinator
 - Agreement with school
 - Donor records
 - Food receipts
 - Yearly budget
 - Grant applications
- School liaison
 - Student information
 - Parental permission

Menu Planning

It is very important to put the most nutritious items possible in the child meal pack. Here are some considerations when selecting food:

- meal packs should contain a variety of foods from each food group, including items that can be used together to create complete meals. Special attention should be paid to include a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, low-fat dairy products, and items low in sodium, sugar, saturated fat and trans fat.
- Do not use food needing refrigeration.
- Do not make packs too heavy
- If using fresh fruits and vegetables how will you prevent bruising during transportation?
- Include high protein items, such as chili, beans, soups, canned pasta with meat, or products containing peanut butter.
- Incorporate a low fat-calcium rich food, such as shelf stable milk, to ensure your students are getting at least one of the 3-4 servings of dairy a day which is necessary for building strong bones and teeth.
- Choose nutritious cereal – sugar should not be the first ingredient. Consider instant oatmeal with directions on preparation.

KID-FRIENDLY SAMPLE MENU:

BREAKFAST:

- 2 Individual Packets of Instant Oatmeal
- OR 1 Full Box of Cereal

LUNCH:

- 1 Jar of Peanut Butter & 1 Plastic Jar of Jelly or Jam
- OR 2 Boxes of Macaroni and Cheese
- OR 2 Cans of Soup or Stew

SNACK:

- 2 Granola Bars
- OR 2 Small Bags of Pretzels
- OR 2 Bags of Goldfish Crackers

OPTION OF FRUIT:

- 1 Can of Peaches or Pears in 100 percent juice, not heavy syrup
- OR 1 Plastic Container of Applesauce
- OR 100 percent Fruit Snacks or Fruit Leather

OPTION OF VEGETABLES:

- 1 Can of Green Beans, Carrots, or Corn

- When selecting snack options, choose single serving packaging with no more than 35% calories from fat or sugar (with the exception of fat in nuts or seeds).
- If including a fruit cup, select fruit packed in its own fruit juice or light syrup.
- If including a juice box, use 100% fruit juice when possible.
- Remember, some kids may not have working appliances and in many cases no adult supervision to prepare meals.

Assembling and distributing meal packs

- How and where will you package the food? Each food item MUST be correctly labelled, see section titled “Labelling Requirements”
- Where will the food be stored?
- What day of the week will you pack the meal packs?
- Does the school have a room or space available for you to store the food for the program?
- Is the cafeteria or another common area available for you and your volunteers to pack the food? If you are breaking down bulk product you must use a state licensed kitchen.
- How will you distribute the meal packs? It is best to deliver meal packs to the schools then let the staff distribute to students.
- What day of the week will you distribute the meal packs? Bags are usually distributed by teachers on Fridays.
- Are you going to distribute additional food or resources for extended breaks?
- Be aware that background checks may be required for all volunteers who may come in contact with children.
- Determine what you will do if there is a snow day or unscheduled day off.

Establish your budget

Before starting a child meal pack program, you will need to decide how to fund the program. Account for food costs, delivery charges, bags to pack food, administrative time, markets/publicity and then any other miscellaneous costs.

Food will likely be your largest cost. Due to the possible inconsistent availability of food, try to maintain three to five week storage of food. Each meal pack should cost \$3.00 to \$5.00.

Example:

$$\begin{aligned} \$3.00 \times 100 \text{ students} &= \$300.00 \text{ each week} \times 36 \text{ weeks per year} \\ &= \$10,800 \text{ each year for 100 students.} \end{aligned}$$

We suggest looking to community groups and clubs, businesses, churches, and individuals for financial donations. A school’s PTO or school board may be a good place to start to rally support for the program. Be creative and consider all types of funding sources. A buy one-give one program may

work with some retailers. Local restaurants and bakeries may be willing to donate day-old baked goods.

If you have to purchase food determine what kinds of foods are best and the amount per week to put in a child meal pack.

Obtaining food through the food bank can help with your overall budget. If you are not already an agency of Feeding America West Michigan, please contact us or visit our website, www.feedwm.org for more information. Please be aware that when the food bank receives donations from manufacturers and distributors items may be near or past their “USE BY”, “BEST IF USED BY”, or “QUALITY ASSURANCE” date. These dates refer to the last date the product is likely to be at peak flavor and quality. It doesn't mean the food is unsafe after that date. In general, these items are still of acceptable quality up to one year from this date.

Food Storage Criteria (before and after packing)

- The room where you store food is to be securely locked to eliminate pilferage or theft. Should refrigerators and freezers be located outside the locked room, they should be clearly identified as “pantry only” and locked.
- The room where you store food is to be completely intact; meaning there are no cracks in the walls, floor, or ceiling, or unfinished gaps (incomplete electrical outlets, pipe connections, etc.) Flooring (such as tiles, carpet, or linoleum) should cover the sub-floor from wall to wall.
- The room where food is stored must be free of pests (insects or rodents) or mold. Any signs of infestation should prompt immediate correction.
- All food must be stored at 4” to 6” off of the floor (6” preferred). No food, whether in cases, or original packaging, may be stacked on the floor.
- All food must be stored separately from non-food items, including cleaning supplies, personal care items, donated clothing, and even paper products.
 - If space is not a constraint, food and non-food items should be kept in different rooms,
 - If space is limited, then non-food items stored in airtight closet or cupboard while food occupies the room proper.
 - If space at a premium, keep non-food products in bins with airtight lids which act as a barrier to odors that could permeate dry packaged product.
 - The food bank is an economical source for personal care items (shampoo, soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes), while these do not appear on our grocery list, you can request them in the comment box when you check out.

Pack Preparation

The food bank does not recommend repacking food, however, we understand this can be an economical option. The following guidelines have been provided by the MSU Extension Service.

Feeding America West Michigan requests that all repacking occur in a licensed kitchen under the supervision of a ServSafe trained manager.

Begin at the beginning – Breaking Bulk Quantities into Small Sizes

Every time food is handled it increases the risk of foodborne illness. High risk foods such as meat, cheese, cooked grains, precooked foods and **cut or sliced fruits and vegetables should be repackaged ONLY in sites where staff have been specifically trained to perform this function and only in facilities that have approved kitchens.** Other foods such as uncooked rice, dried beans, dry cereal, dry pasta may be repacked when absolutely necessary by using these guidelines. All food must be labelled correctly.

Guidelines for repacking acceptable food are as follows:

1. **Do not work with food if you have not felt well** or if you have nausea, diarrhea or a temperature in the last 24 hours. Do not work with foods if you are sneezing, coughing or if you have a runny nose. Do not work with foods if you have an infected cut or wound.
2. If you have a wound or cut on your hands or arms that is not infected, bandage it.
3. Wear a hair net and clean or disposable apron.
4. Do not smoke or eat while you are repackaging food.
5. Sanitize work surfaces using a solution of 1 part bleach to 10 parts water. Spray surfaces liberally, let sit at least 30 seconds. Let air dry or use disposable toweling. Never use dish cloths or dish towels as these can transmit bacteria.
6. Wash hands.
7. Collect implements, containers and foods needed for repackaging. Never re-use containers, these must be for one time use only
8. Glove hands
9. If you touch your hair, face, the floor, the trash can or any unclean surface – change your gloves.
10. Use scoops, spoons, etc. to transfer product from original packaging to new packaging.
11. Use only food safe packaging. Do not use grocery bags, trash bags, etc. to store food. Secure the packaging.
12. Repackaged food **MUST** be labeled with expiration date, ingredients list and nutrition information from the original label.
13. Do not leave meal packages open on counters or tables for extended periods of time (e.g. during a break). Work in batches that you can finish.
14. Store repacked food safely. **NEVER** pile packaged food on the floor.
15. Sanitize work surface after you are finished.
16. Wash hands.

Labelling Requirements

The labels on the food we distribute are incredibly important to its safety. To help protect the people you serve from potential allergens, it is necessary to check labels and ensure that they have all the information that is required. If you break down a product, for example breaking apart a four-pack of applesauce, and there is not a label on each product, you will need to make a label for each portion. All complete labels should include the following information:

1. Name of the product.
2. Name and address of organization that repacked the item.
3. Net quantity.
4. Full ingredients in order of prominence (by weight).
5. Any of the “big 8” allergens (milk, eggs, soy beans/soy products, fish, tree nuts, peanuts, shellfish, wheat).
6. Date and location of repacking
7. Any safe food handling instructions, cook times and temperatures.

Pack Delivery and Storage

BACKPACKS OR BAGS: Choose a type of bag that you want to distribute the food in. Remember one bag is needed for every child, each week.

- Plastic bags work well because they can easily be collected and do not require a child to return the bag the following week.
- Reusable bags can be environmentally friendly, but you risk children or families losing the bags and require you to purchase more. Backpacks have these same problems and may carry a social stigma for the child.

The number of times you deliver each month will depend on the number of children referred to the program and the available storage space. Remember to use safe food preparation, transportation and storage.

Here are some thoughts shared with us from other child meal pack programs:

Have criteria for who should receive a child meal pack. Have a succinct explanation of how the students are to be identified.

- School staff, teachers, and counselors identify children that they feel are not getting enough food at home to participate in the child meal pack program. Oftentimes cafeteria staff can identify children who are rushing the food lines Monday morning because they have not had

enough food over the weekend. Other times teachers are already buying food for children who they know need the extra help.

- Food Insecure: If a child does not get enough food outside of school he/she is considered “food insecure.” The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as households that are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet basic needs of all their members because of insufficient money or other resources.
- When the guardian of a child has to choose between food and other necessities, e.g., having electricity shut off because they don’t have enough money, it is an indicator of food insecurity. Any child who is food insecure should be considered a candidate for receiving a child meal pack.
- Advocate that this program maintain a level of confidentiality. Another thing to be aware of is in your initial meeting with the school, advise them about “advertising” the program to the students. Make sure the school does what it can to maintain the confidentiality of the students. This can also help prevent child meal pack recipients from being made fun of. Generally speaking, the younger children have no problem receiving the child meal pack, while the 5th and 6th graders can easily become embarrassed.
- Have step-by-step instructions for the school. Before a school begins distributing food and child meal packs make sure they have their system worked out for how they will fill the child meal packs and distribute them. They will need to know where the food will be stored, who will help pack the child meal packs, and who will distribute the child meal packs to the children.
- Decide about food for siblings. Many programs choose to send extra food for the siblings of a student. Take care not to make the child meal pack too heavy for the student to carry.
- Determine if a backpack or bagged food is appropriate for distribution by school staff. Teachers and counselors should distribute food discreetly to each participating child when food is distributed in child meal packs.
- Be sensitive to the environment at each school. Every school is different. With that in mind it is important to make your program adaptable.
- Be aware there are many homeless teens in the High School, these students are particularly sensitive to receiving food. Please share ways your program has addressed this concern.

If you have additional questions about starting a child meal pack program, please contact your regional Agency Relations Representative, 616.784.3250

Sample Program Information

The [Insert the Name of Your Program] provides a weekend supply of nutritious food for children when school lunch and breakfast is unavailable on a weekend or school holiday. Each meal pack contains:

2 breakfasts, 2 lunches, 2 snacks, and 1 can of vegetables and 1 can of fruit.

All food is nonperishable and provided to children free of charge. It is our hope these resources will support the health, behavior, and achievement of every student that participates.

Though the program is intended to help those children whose families find it difficult to have enough food for the entire month, all children are eligible for this program. Information to sign up for the program will be sent home with kids in the coming weeks.

The program is run completely by wonderful volunteers who help pack the meal packs. The program is funded through the generous gifts of [list your funding sources.]

Look for more information about becoming part of [Insert Name of Program] soon. We look forward to working with staff, teachers, and you for your children!

For more information or questions, please contact [Insert Name of Program Leader] at [Insert Contact Information for Program].

Sample Parental Opt-In form

Date:

Dear Parents/Guardians:

We are happy to tell you that your child qualifies for the child meal pack Program this year.

If you choose to allow your child to participate, he/she will receive a child meal pack of nutritional food items every Friday during the school year. The food is at no cost to you or your child.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact the school's child meal pack Coordinator, _____ at _____.

If you choose to allow your child to participate in the program, please let us know how the child meal pack Program is working for you and your family.

I want my child to join the child meal pack program.

I do not want my child to join the child meal pack program.

This program is a partnership between [your organization], [name of school] and Feeding America West Michigan.

Parent / Guardian Signature

Date

Sample Opt-Out Form

Please remove my child(ren) from the [Insert Name of Program]. I understand my child(ren) will no longer receive a supply of food at the end of each week for his/her use over the weekend or school holiday. PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY.

Today's Date _____

Child's Name, Teacher and Grade _____

Parent/ Guardian Signature: _____

Please print Parent/Guardian Name: _____

If you would like to participate in the future, please contact your school's front office. Thank you for considering the [Insert Name of Your Program]!

Dear Parents/Legal Guardians:

We want to thank you and your family for being a part of [Insert Name of Your Program]. We would love to learn more about your family and what your child(ren) like and don't like about the program. It is your hope to make this the best program for your family and your child. Please be honest and turn in this brief questionnaire to your child's home folder or the school's front desk when you are done. Thank you!

Your Name (optional): _____

Your Child's Name (optional): _____

1. What were your three favorite foods provided?

2. What was your least favorite food provided?

3. Please check any you have at home:

Oven Stove Top Microwave Toaster Toaster Oven Refrigerator

4. Who prepares the food in your home?

5. On a scale of 1-5, how much do you like this program?

1 (Do Not Like It!) 2 3 4 5 (Love the program!)

6. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the program?

Additional comments? Please contact [Insert Name of School Liaison] at [Insert Contact Information for Program].

Follow-Up Survey for Teachers

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU! What do you think of the [Insert Name of Your Program]? We want to thank you for your continued support and help with [Insert Name of Your Program]. We would appreciate your honest opinion about how the program is running and what we can do to improve the program.

Your Name (optional): _____

Number of children that participate in your class: _____

1. On a scale of 1-5, how easy is it to hand out the bags?

1 (Confusing & disorganized) 2 3 4 5 (Very easy!)

2. On a scale of 1-5, how easy is it to keep the food stored and clean in your classroom?

1 (Disrupts class) 2 3 4 5 (Food is easy to store and doesn't smell)

3. Have you seen any improvements in the performance or behavior of the children participating? Examples?

4. What are the kids saying about the program?

5. What has been the response from parents? Good? Bad?

6. On a scale of 1-5, how much do you like this program?

1 (Do not like it!) 2 3 4 5 (Love it!)

7. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for the program?

Additional comments? Please contact [Insert Name of School Liaison] at [Insert Contact Information for Program]