

Hello, this is Talia Ciarabellini from the Blood Bank with a community comment.

For the last three years I have had the pleasure of being a volunteer for the Backpacks for kids program through Food for People. I am just one member of a small dedicated team that picks up food from food for people every other week, packs 51 bags of food and then delivers them to a local elementary school.

According to the Humboldt County Office of Education, more than 50% of Humboldt County children are enrolled in the free/reduced school meal program. For many of these children, the school meals that they receive are their primary source of nutrition. Unfortunately, for these hungry children school is not seven days a week.

Thankfully the backpack program comes in to help meet their needs and fill in the gaps on weekends and school vacations. The Backpacks for Kids program was originally designed to counteract the negative consequences of weekend hunger and the response to date has been overwhelmingly positive. This year, thanks to support provided through grants, donations and special fundraising efforts, the program is now currently serving 404 children per week at 23 sites located throughout Humboldt County and will soon be increasing enrollment to 460 per week. The cost to serve each child for one full school year is \$250 and community volunteers from civic groups and various businesses have provided over 700 hours of their time assisting with enrollment, packing and delivering.

Every week the children in the program are receiving child-friendly, nonperishable, easily consumed and vitamin fortified foods that they would not have access to otherwise. ~~Some examples of the backpack foods are shelf stable milk, 100% fruit juice, macaroni and cheese, oatmeal or cereal, tuna, canned soup, bread, peanut butter, various snacks, and fruit when available.~~

The kids are always excited to receive their backpacks on Friday afternoons. Some choose to share the contents with their siblings while others are simply relieved that they won't be facing a long, hungry weekend. Research has clearly demonstrated that children experiencing hunger or food insecurity do not perform as well in school as their well-fed peers, so it is not surprising that teachers have reported a significant improvement in attendance, ability to concentrate and behavior among the children receiving the backpacks; they return to school on Mondays ready to learn. Parents report that the food provided helps alleviate the stress of uncertainty for both the parent and the child.

If you would like to help by volunteering or with a financial contribution to the backpacks program you can contact Food for people at (707)445-3166.

Thank you, this has been Talia Ciarabellini from the Northern California Community Blood Bank for Community Comment.