



Claudine Wade, left, Linda Hay and Mary Shane fill weekend food bags for the Backpacks for Kids program.

Eating Right Every Day

Backpacks for Kids program ensures children get a good meal during the weekend

By Jeanie Senior

Without Backpacks for Kids, weekends for almost 400 Klickitat County children might mean going hungry.

Run by volunteers and supported by donations, each Friday the 3-year-old program sends bags of food home with 375 children in three Head Start programs, and primary and middle school students in Goldendale, Klickitat, Roosevelt, White Salmon, Dallesport and Wishram.

“This is a county with a lot of poverty,” says Linda Hay, a member of the Backpack for Kids Board of Directors. “A lot of kids aren’t getting all the nutrition they need to thrive and do well in school.”

Two-thirds of students in Klickitat County schools get free or reduced-price lunches.

“That means those same kids get two good meals a day at school,” Linda says, “and in some cases, little—or nothing—on the weekend.”

Ava Van Velsor, who had worked with a smaller weekend nutrition program on the Oregon Coast, proposed the food program for Klickitat County when she moved here three years ago and went to work for Washington State University Extension. She is now a Backpacks board member.

During the first year, “we probably never exceeded 100 kids,” Linda says.

The number has climbed each year as the national and local economies have

sagged. U.S. Census figures for 2008 peg Klickitat County’s poverty rate at 17 percent, well above the state average of 10.6 percent.

Viewed another way, that means one in six county residents lives in poverty.

The food sent home with each child is shelf-stable and does not require cooking.

“The children who get the packs might not live in a house with electricity, or even with no cooking facilities,” Linda says. “We try to do things kids can just open up and eat, and we try to vary the menu.”

Each weekend bag includes protein—tuna or a beef stick; calcium, such as shelf-stable milk or pudding; fruit, such as applesauce or raisins; and carbohydrates, such as prepared

macaroni and cheese, beef and macaroni or ramen; and a juice box.

Except for the small cartons of chocolate milk, all food is purchased locally at Holcomb's Sentry Market in Goldendale. It was a conscious decision to shop locally, says Linda, who praises Bruce Holcomb for his contributions to the program. That includes sending store employees to load the food for transport to the United Methodist Church of Goldenadale. Once there, they carry it into the church basement, where volunteers pack the sacks each Wednesday.

Another group in White Salmon fills the weekend bags for White Salmon and Dallesport.

The food goes into plastic bags donated by the Klickitat County Sheriff's Department. When they are delivered to participating schools, aides tuck the bags into the children's backpacks. If a child does not have a backpack, one is furnished by the program.

The sheriff's office also delivers food bags weekly to Roosevelt, the most distant school participating in the program.

Volunteer groups take turns filling the bags. Besides members of United Methodist Church, members of Soroptimists, 4-H clubs, Girl Scouts and Rainbow girls have helped.

"School secretaries, primarily, are our eyes and ears in the school," Linda says, noting they identify children who might need the weekend food bags.

Secretaries talk to families, then parents sign a waiver to enroll their children.

"We don't know the children's names, and the school secretaries call us if there's a change in the numbers," Linda says.

"We've gotten some precious little thank you notes, and we get a lot of feedback from teachers" who praise the program for giving students something to eat on the weekend.

Another bonus, according to teachers: More kids come to school on Fridays now because they know they will get a pack.

At the current number, Backpacks for Kids will cost about \$41,000 this year. The goal is to keep the per-child



Linda chats with Holcomb's Sentry Market Manager Dave Jones next to a two-week supply for backpacks.

Backpacks for Kids

- ▶ If you have questions about Backpacks for Kids or want to volunteer, contact (509) 773-4461 or backpacksforkids@hotmail.com.
- ▶ To donate to the program, send donations to Backpacks for Kids, attention treasurer, 304 Fish Hatchery Road, Goldendale, WA 98620.

per-weekend cost at \$3. Sponsoring a child for a year costs \$120.

This summer, the program also offered prepackaged meals that needed no refrigeration three days a week at the Goldendale swimming pool.

"They were available to anybody between 2 and 18 years who asked for one," Linda says. "In nine weeks, we gave away about 800 lunches."

Funding comes almost entirely from

donations. Members of the United Methodist Church have given money, as well as other churches, organizations and several local businesses.

"The donations come in from China—they come from all over the place, when people hear about the program," Linda says.

This year for the first time, donations came from United Way and from the Yakama Nation's Legends Casino.

Backpacks for Kids is a nonprofit organization, which means it can qualify for grants and also issue receipts to donors so they can claim the donation on their tax returns.

In October, which is Hunger Awareness Month, the Backpacks for Kids board sent out a fundraising letter that said, in part, "The need for nutrition for proper brain and body development is well documented, so having food resources available every day of the week is absolutely essential for the students." ■