

Weekend Backpack Program Addresses Food Insecurity in Unified School District of Antigo

Stop in at the Antigo Food Pantry on Wednesday night from 4:30 to 6:00PM during the months of October through May and you will meet some very committed volunteers set on helping to solve food insecurity in the Unified School District of Antigo one backpack at a time. Each week volunteers fill backpacks that are distributed throughout the school district on Fridays. These backpacks contain food which is ready-to-eat or easy-to-prepare. This week the WeekEnd Backpack (WEB) volunteers filled 335 backpacks with canned mixed vegetables, apple sauce, canned chicken, popcorn, Mac 'n Minutes, and a small pack of HoneyNut cereal.

The WEB program impacts children of all ages in the school district with backpacks being distributed to all schools including Peace Lutheran and All Saints Catholic schools. Gail Moore who oversees the WEB program at the high schools says, "The WEB Program means so much to the students at the high school. Several students have told me thank you; now I will have something to eat when I get home." She continues, "I have had mothers tell me that without the program their families would not get fruit or enough protein."

WEB is offered through the efforts many community partners including Aspirus Langlade Hospital, the Unified School District of Antigo, the Langlade Health Coalition, Langlade County, UW-Extension, the Boys and Girls Club, and the Antigo Community Food Pantry. These organizations come together with a goal of addressing the needs of children in families dealing with food insecurity and its impact on learning.

Sara Olafson and Megan Mattek, from Aspirus Langlade Hospital, have been with the program since its inception and work to ensure its sustainability by leading fundraising efforts and overall program coordination. Mattek shares that the program started as a means to address the higher than average free and reduced lunch rates in the school district. "With the help of Kari Lazars, the community partners researched interventions in surrounding districts facing similar issues and developed a program to address weekend hunger for children in our district."

To make this program such a success, organization is very important. A core group of volunteers that sit on steering committee manage the details of the operations to a point where WEB runs like a well-oiled machine. They set up the menus, order food, organize backpacks by school, organize volunteers to fill backpacks, and monitor the pickup and delivery of backpacks between the Pantry and the schools.

Jen Beran with Langlade County serves on the committee and plays the important role of coordinating family enrollment and data collection for the program. Jen Renfro from Aspirus Langlade Hospital Senior Services chairs the steering committee. She values the commitment of these lead volunteers who work diligently to keep the program operating smoothly while always looking towards improving implementation.

More than 400 hundred volunteers, signing up through the Antigo Community Food Pantry website, are needed throughout the year to help fill backpacks. Wendy Simonis, coordinator of volunteers for WEB is impressed with the wide variety of volunteers that come to the Pantry to fill backpacks. She lists that

volunteers come from school clubs and sports teams, churches, service clubs, businesses, and community organizations.

Simonis provides an example of the strong commitment of WEB volunteers, “Jamie and Jenna Nelson have volunteered for the program for three years. They come weekly to help fill backpacks and organize them into containers that are then delivered to the schools.”

Brynn Radtke and Emma Packard are high school students who have volunteered weekly for the WEB program for over two years. Packard explains their commitment. “I love knowing that I am helping to feed over 300 kids each week. “ Employees from organizations like CoVantage and collaborative teams from the Unified School of Antigo sign up as groups to fill backpacks for a night.

Lakeside Grocery plays a key role in the success of WEB. Carolyn Kelk, Aspirus Langlade Hospital Registered Dietitian and WEB volunteer, works with Lakeside to order the food for the program. “Lakeside has been a huge contributor to the WEB program. Lakeside assists with WEB every week by ordering the food for us, storing it if needed, and then delivering it. The staff there is always very accommodating and tries to help us get the best price for the food.”

WEB is currently in its fourth year of operation in the Unified School District of Antigo, and its success has spread to the White Lake School district who started offering a weekend backpack program last spring. Mattek acknowledges that the WEB program has facilitated the opportunity for the committee to work with surrounding districts and build relationships as communities come together to support children.

The WEB program has benefitted from the generous donations from the community and through grants from organizations such as Walmart and the United Way. Volm Companies donates money for the purchase of the backpacks.

There are many ways for the community to get involved in the WEB. Individuals can sponsor a backpack for the year for \$160. Volunteers can go to antigofoodpantry.com and sign up to fill backpacks. Individuals can spread the word about the success of the program to families that could benefit or to other districts that might like to utilize the model.

WEB is just one more example of how the community of Antigo comes together to support those in need through generosity and kindness.

Picture: The crew of volunteers that helped filled backpacks this week.