



THE NEWS Guard

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Duo eases hunger one backpack at a time

Kira Rubenthaler

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Karen Dummer sees a lot of hungry children. As the family advocate at Oceanlake Elementary School in Lincoln City, Dummer encounters students who are always hungry at school, who come to her with stomach aches in the afternoon.

"We saw a great need here," Dummer said. "We have a great need in Lincoln County."

Dummer wanted to help these children, and she found a way to do it in January while helping a student with his Weekly Reader.

The Reader had an article about America's Second Harvest backpack program, where hungry kids are sent home before the weekend - or school vacations - with a backpack full of food to help them get enough to eat when they aren't eating meals at school.

Dummer decided to start a similar program at Oceanlake, and she hopes to expand the program to Taft Elementary and Taft 7-12.

EASING HUNGER among Oceanlake Elementary students are Karen Dummer, left, and Pat Robertson, who have started what they call "a backpack program" to send food home with hungry students to see them through the weekend. News Guard photo by Kira Rubenthaler

"This is a way I can help the kids without putting (food) in my car and going door to door," she said.

With the help of Pat and Roger Robertson of Lincoln City and substitute Oceanlake principal Jess Kennison, Dummer got the program rolling.

In a community where holiday givers are generous with donations, Dummer said the response has been overwhelming. "I knew people would want to do it year round if they had a way to do it," she said.

The first set of backpacks went out Feb. 16. "The kids came back real excited," she said.

On Feb. 23, Dummer sent home 15 backpacks of food to feed 36 children. "This is only in our second week, and we're adding every week," she said.

The amount of food each child receives depends on how many siblings they have, as Dummer tries to send home enough food for all the children in the family.

Students don't have to meet a specific criteria to qualify for the backpack program, Dummer said. She notices that some students don't get enough to eat, and teachers also tell her if they think a student is hungry.

Many Oceanlake students qualify for free and reduced lunches, but before sending food home with students, Dummer has the children ask their parents if it's okay. "Parents are happy to have the help," Dummer said.

A couple parents said they didn't need the assistance but wanted to know how they could help the program, she said.

Dummer needs volunteers to help pick up and inventory food and stuff backpacks, and she needs food and cash donations.

The program is emphasizing kid-friendly food, Dummer said, items that are nutritious and easy to prepare without much help from an adult.

She stuffs the backpacks with items such as fruit, cans of tuna, soup with pull tabs, crackers, sugar-free cereal and peanut butter. The backpacks themselves are nondescript and look like a normal school backpack, Dummer said.

It's not uncommon for students to carry two backpacks at school anyway - one with school supplies and one with clothes for after-school practice or a weekend at a parent's house - so receiving the food is confidential.

If she can collect enough food, Dummer plans to send home backpacks of food twice during the week before spring break, March 26-30, so students can stockpile food for the vacation.

She's not sure yet how they will run the program during the summer, but for now Dummer is focused on getting donations and getting students enough to eat.

In Lincoln County, many mothers and fathers - if there are two parents in the household - work low-income service jobs, Dummer said. "They don't have the means," she said. "They just don't have the means."

With the cost of rent, bills and gas to get to work, "sometimes they just can't get that food bill to stretch," she said. "It's not that parents don't want the kids to eat."

Dummer hopes the backpack program will help the children in these families in which parents are trying, struggling and doing their best. "Why should the kids pay for it?" she said, because mom and dad's efforts fall short.

How to help

You can help the backpack program by volunteering to pick up or inventory food, organize the pantry shelf or stuff backpacks.

You can also donate food (nutritious, nonperishable, easy to prepare and kid friendly) or money to purchase food.

Possible food items:

Peanut butter

Jelly

Bread or crackers

Macaroni and cheese

Spaghettios

Small boxes of real fruit juice

Cereal (sugar-free)

Complete pancake mix

Easy-open cans of tuna

Tuna helper

Boxes of pop tarts

Packs of pudding cups

Chicken noodle soup

Cups of noodles

Snack-size fruit cups

Fruit snacks

Apples, oranges

Protein bars

Powdered milk

Rice or soy milk

To help, call Karen Dummer or Pat Robertson at 994-5296.

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