

# Search

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## **Axing hunger over the weekend**

**SUMMARY:** Coast For families who can't quite make ends meet, Backpack Friday gives students food to carry home  
LINCOLN CITY --At 2:40 on a Friday afternoon, a voice echoes down the halls of Oceanlake Elementary School. "Just your friendly reminder, it's backpack Friday."

In moments, a half dozen first- and second-graders crowd into Karen Dummer's office, each eagerly grabbing a backpack.

"Hey, someone help me with this," calls a slight boy with crooked teeth and a crew cut. "It's heavy."

A tall, skinny girl with long brown hair gives the boy an assist, then turns to Dummer and with sincerity beyond her seven years, says, "Thank you for letting me have a backpack."

Then the students troop out, happy with the knowledge that this weekend they will not go hungry.

But plenty of other children will.

The central Oregon coast is known for all kinds of pretty scenes -- crashing waves and sandy beaches, towering lighthouses and arcing bridges. But in this vacation haven flush with luxury condos, oceanfront mansions and chic second homes, there's another picture many people don't see --poverty, hungry kids and homeless families, and the working poor who never quite manage to make ends meet.

Lincoln County has one of the highest rates of poverty --19.1 percent -in Oregon, according to the U.S. Census. Twenty-eight percent of children younger than 18 live in poverty, and 6 percent --Oregon's highest --of the student population is homeless.

At Oceanlake Elementary, about three-quarters of students are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Dummer sees the signs every day: The kids who were always first in the lunch line, the ones who eagerly asked their classmates, "If you're not going to eat that, can I?" And daily reports from teachers about students with headaches, irritable moods and little to no attention spans.

"It used to be there were only a few of those kids in your class and you could fill their needs," says Micky Willoughby, who has taught at Oceanlake for 24 years. "Now, there are so many kids, you can't do it. Our community has gone from low income to poverty stricken."

The situation seemed hopeless until Dummer read in a Weekly

Reader story of an Arkansas nurse who started a backpack program. In February 2007, Dummer and health assistant Pat Robertson started their own program.

The first week, there were five packs. Now, every Friday, as many as 75 students from three Lincoln City schools take home a backpack filled with about \$14 worth of food, including a loaf of bread, peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese, juice, fruit and tins of tuna or other canned meat. The backpacks and food are donated or purchased with donations, all gathered, sorted, stored and packed by volunteers.

"The community has been wonderful. Absolutely astounding," says Dummer.

Wages don't keep up

Poverty on the coast is not new, but it is getting worse, says Tom Cope, resource development officer with the Corvallis-based Community Services Consortium. In short, says Cope, most of the low-wage jobs that dominate employment on the coast can't begin to keep up with the rising cost of living.

"There are a lot of service industry jobs," he says. "They don't pay well, and they are seasonal."

A family of three earning less than \$17,600 a year is considered to be living in poverty, according to the federal government. By that standard, that family should spend about \$440 a month in rent under guidelines that say housing costs should equate to about 30 percent of a family's income.

But basic rents in Lincoln County start near \$800 a month, says Barbara Dougherty, director of the Lincoln Commission on Children and Families.

"We have many working families who cannot afford to be in a house," Dougherty says. "They are doubled in apartments or couch surfing or living in very compromised situations."

The Lincoln City schools are the only ones in the county sending home backpacks, but other communities try to help in other ways.

Sixteen years ago, Senitila McKinley, Lincoln County School District homeless advocate, founded the Seashore Family Literacy project. It has since grown into the Community Learning Center, which offers a range of services to the poor.

On a Saturday morning in April, the center's parking lot in Waldport is filled to overflowing. Inside, about 50 people line up for a free breakfast of pancakes, eggs and sausage. In a back room, men and women search through shelves of neatly stacked used clothing and shoes.

At a cafeteria table, Nanette Froehlich savors the hot breakfast. Her son, Baron, 12, sits quietly trying to pretend he is not there. "He's embarrassed," Froehlich explains.

The two live in a travel trailer at Beverly Beach State Park, dependent largely upon the kindness of strangers to get by.

"I stopped working in October 2006 when I started getting really sick," says Froehlich, who says she has cancer of the uterus. "I always paid my taxes, Social Security, everything, and no one will help me."

Moments later, volunteers file through the community center doors carrying boxes of food donated by local grocers. The breakfast guests gather around, helping themselves to packages of meat near expiration dates, overripe fruit and vegetables and boxes of rice, cereal and pasta. The food is gone in minutes.

Ninety minutes after the breakfast began, the crowd filters out into the parking lot.

"Do you have enough gas to make it home?" McKinley calls to Froehlich.

"I hope so," Froehlich answers. "Probably not."

McKinley reaches into her own car, shuffles a few things and emerges with several folded bills. "Here," she says, handing them to Froehlich. "I just happened to have this in my car. It's your lucky day."

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