

Weld Food Bank Backpack Program

For most children, Friday afternoons find them joyfully running out of their classrooms and into their yards to play soccer with their friends, but for some students, like many children in Weld County, the weekend does not bring excitement—it brings concern about how they will manage to get enough to eat and a warm bed to sleep in.

The Weld County Food Bank's Backpack Program, a Feeding America affiliate organization and program, is one organization's way of trying to solve this problem and allow these children from low-income families to get the nutrition they need to stay healthy and in school.

In 2006, the Weld County Food Bank, along with the Greeley Dream Team—another nonprofit that is dedicated to serving at-risk and homeless youth in Greeley—received a one-year grant from the Wal-Mart Foundation to get the program up and running. With the funds they received, they managed to fill 400 backpacks a week, with each bag containing six to eight different healthy snack items, an easy-to-make meal a child can prepare for themselves, and one boxed milk and juice that do not need to be refrigerated.

Currently, the program is assembling about 200 backpacks a week, as they no longer have the funding from the Wal-Mart Foundation to enable them to do the 400. This 200 encompasses elementary, middle, and high school students in over 20 schools in the Greeley area.

One of the schools specifically targeted by the program is Jefferson Elementary, which has over 90 percent of its students on the free-and-reduced-lunch program. As a result of the growing need, the Backpack Program completely blankets Jefferson's fourth and fifth grade classes, giving every student a backpack at the beginning of every weekend.

The Greeley Dream Team, in coordination with the local school district, identifies which students are in need of the service provided by the Backpack Program and provides the list to the Weld County Food Bank. The food bank is then responsible for assembling all the backpacks and delivering them to the school offices for distribution. The name of the program is a bit deceiving as the food is not distributed in actual backpacks; this however is not due to the fact that the program is not providing them. In the beginning, the weekend supply of food was given out in backpacks, but a child carrying around two backpacks was not only a lot to handle but a bit embarrassing for them. As a result, the program now packages the food in grocery bags that can be discretely slipped into a child's own bag.

The Backpack Program has received a grant from the Littler Youth Fund from the Community Foundation Serving Greeley and Weld County, and it covers a large piece of the program's cost. They have received the grant two times, with the second and most recent time allotting them 5,000 dollars of funding. Each backpack costs about 2.15 dollars to make, and annually, the cost of the backpacks themselves, not the assembly or delivery, is about 10,000 dollars per year.

The Backpack Program is dedicated to meeting the needs of the Greeley community, as is the Community Foundation Serving Greeley and Weld County, and it is partnerships like these, as well as the giving individuals behind them, that truly remind us what it means to be a part of something greater than ourselves.

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