

Backpack Coalition



From Isolated Individuals to Community-wide Effort

Backpack Programs are volunteer-run, weekend food assistance for the most economically vulnerable children in our community. These children depend on HCPS school nutrition programs during the week and lack a stable supply of nutritious food at home. Children receive a supply of food on Fridays (originally in their backpacks, hence the name) for their families to prepare over the weekend: shelf-stable grains, beans, canned goods, mixes, and ready-to-eat foods.

Keister Elementary and Spotswood Elementary School, in partnership with local congregations, have been in operation for more than a decade as the city's longest running programs. Backpack Programs have come and gone at other schools, but years-long consistency in financial and volunteer support have been in short supply. When the pandemic destabilized even the Spotswood Program, it became clear that these programs needed broader community organization and support. This is when the Backpack Coalition was formed.

The Backpack Coalition is made up of coordinators, volunteers and financial partners from the different school programs. We meet quarterly to mutually support Backpack Programs across the district discussing food choices, bag assembly, and volunteer management; how to identify students in need of the program in collaboration with school staff; troubleshooting challenges together, and making our successes and challenges known. Harrisonburg Education Foundation serves as a hub for coalition members, convening meetings and helping connect the volunteers to available resources.

Voices from the Field

A little boy stopped and whispered to me recently when I was packing bags, telling me that he and his family look forward to receiving their bag every week. Every child that needs a bag should receive a bag. I am so grateful to every person that makes these programs possible.

Tamara Grant
Keister Volunteer Coordinator
HEF Board member

Being a part of this program and connecting to other individuals who want to help has been a real bright spot for me over the last few years. The backpack program is just one of the many examples of how our Friendly City supports community members and lifts up folks who may be struggling.

Emma Phillips
Smithland Coordinator

The efforts of these projects allows our educators to worry about one less thing. It demonstrates how many individuals and organizations care about the students of HCPS.

Cody Oliver
Executive Director, HEF

Progress in Scope and Sustainability

Alerted to the children's needs and the existence of the Coalition by media reports and personal networking, parents at Stone Spring and staff at Patchwork Pantry on behalf of Waterman stepped up last year to create programs--which means that every elementary school now has a Backpack Program! Food insecure families can also experience housing insecurity. Now, if a child changes residence mid-year, they continue receiving food from the Backpack Program at their new school.

Skyline Middle, in partnership with the Arc of Harrisonburg and Rockingham and Divine Unity Community Church, have a well-supported Backpack Program with food delivered weekly. Harrisonburg High School is partnering directly with Blue Ridge Area Food Bank to create an in-school food pantry for students in addition to their ongoing, once-monthly fresh food market. Coalition members use quarterly meetings and emails to raise awareness of different updates and activities across the district. Discussions include selecting the best foods, working with volunteers and budget planning. Each program strives to be responsive to the families they serve. For example, the Bluestone program recently worked with school counselors to survey families and identified those in need of can openers and microwaves and met those needs as well.

The Backpack Coalition portal on the HEF website allows anyone to donate to the Backpack Coalition--whether to a specific program or the one that "needs it most." Coalition members determine together where those funds should be dispersed. The Coalition's group fund and advocacy work allows programs across the division to continue equitably, shouldering the heavy responsibilities of securing financial support. Not every coordinator or program volunteer donating their time is a seasoned fundraiser. Since the launch of the Coalition, HEF received \$11,754 with a majority of funds going to the program that "needs it most." This allowed for launch funds for the Stone Spring program and the continuation of programs at Smithland, Spotswood, and Stone Spring this fall without any reduction of services.

Grow with the Strength of Our Community

The Coalition provides structure and support beyond isolated individuals; it's a community coming together to lift up those who are struggling. Backpack programs in Harrisonburg City Schools are currently serving around 300 students (and their families), but we know there is room to grow.

Thomas Harrison Middle School is currently in transition as their previous food partnership has ended, and the Coalition hopes to organize a replacement program there soon.

Your contribution and involvement with the Backpack Coalition has made all this possible. Thank you for the financial support, the volunteer hours, and for spreading the word among your friends and neighbors!

To give, volunteer or learn more about the Backpack Coalition visit:

tinyurl.com/HEFbackpack

Voices from the Field

It sends the message that we, as a community, care about them--as parents and families, and it helps children have adequate nutrition so that they're able to begin the day fed and ready to learn.

Dane Byers
Trinity Presbyterian Church,
Fiscal Agent for Bluestone &
Keister

As the director of Patchwork, I am glad we can provide another means of supporting food needs in our community outside our typical Wednesday evening distribution.

Jennifer Ulrich
Waterman Elementary
Patchwork Pantry

I want the community to know that they can support our program financially or with their time. We would love to expand the program to serve more students. That takes money and volunteers.

Eric Kennedy
Counselor, Smithland Elementary