

Report from the Backpack Project Forum

Editor's note. Contained in this report from the Backpack Project Forum (held March 13, 2010, in Brookings, SD) are capsule summaries of those topics to which we gave primary attention. The report is offered both as a record of the event for those who attended and as a humble source of information and inspiration for other backpack food projects. No doubt I have made numerous errors of both omission and commission; for these, I apologize in advance. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the participants in the forum for your candid sharing, your resourcefulness and creativity, and your remarkable efforts on behalf of the children in your communities. It was, and is, a privilege to be among you.

—Phyllis Cole-Dai, Brookings Backpack Project

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Note: Backpack project(s) will be abbreviated in this document to "BP."

I. Attendance and Common Mission. Nearly 20 people attended the forum, and several individuals who couldn't be present submitted questions for the group's consideration. The BPs that were represented range in age from soon-to-be-established to three years old. They are located in widely different communities, from small rural towns to metropolitan areas. Despite their differences, all share the same mission: to partner with their public schools (and sometimes early childhood education programs) to help feed those students in their communities who don't have enough to eat on weekends. These BPs are among an estimated 3600 nationally, and that number seems to be rapidly growing.

Here is an alphabetical list of the BPs represented at the forum (either in person or by proxy). If known, BP age and number of children currently served are also shown:

Brookings, SD: First year of existence; 252 students currently (Head Start through senior high)

Fort Dodge, IA: Started January, 2010; 50 students currently

Grant-Deuel, SD: Started March, 2010; 6 students currently

Highmore-Harrold, SD: To start late March; 13 students currently

Huron, SD: (details unknown)

Iroquois, SD: (details unknown)

Mankato, MN: Started March, 2010; 35 students currently (elementary school)

Milbank, SD: Started January, 2010; 102 students currently

New Brighton, MN: To start late March, 2010 currently (number of students unknown)

Pierre, SD: Second year of existence; 300 students currently (pre-K through 5th grade)

Vermillion, SD: Second year of existence; 50 students currently

Sioux Falls, SD: Third year of existence; 2,825 students (early childhood through senior high)

Spring Creek/St. Francis Indian School, SD: First year of existence; 30/130 students currently (3rd-5th grade)¹

II. Nonprofit Status

A. The "big picture." All participants agreed that it is essential for a BP either to obtain nonprofit status or to operate under the umbrella of another nonprofit agency or organization. Without nonprofit status, it is very difficult if not impossible to get donations, grants, United Way funding and so on. (In the last case, check into the policies of your local United Way organization, because they vary somewhat. For example, United Way in Vermillion will not fund the local BP if it operates under a church's nonprofit umbrella. By contrast, United Way in Brookings has granted very generous funding to its local BP even though it has a church as a fiscal host.)

B. Fiscal host or independent nonprofit status. Would it be better for a BP to have a fiscal host or to become an independent nonprofit organization? The decision depends on a project's "big picture." The application process is cumbersome. Is it worth it? Look beyond

¹ This is a unique project called "Bountiful Backpacks," administered through the South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension Service through a two-year grant from the Wellmark Foundation. The project, which focuses on obesity prevention, provides food and education to elementary students living in extremely low-income families on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. Healthy grocery items are distributed through backpacks every other Friday during the school year to address nutrition and food security issues, and interactive nutrition and cooking lessons are presented to increase the children's awareness of healthy eating habits and food preparation skills.

today and try to evaluate the project's sustainability over the long-term. What will it need to survive and thrive, especially in terms of funding and staffing? Which approach will better help it meet these needs?

- 1. The fiscal host approach.** Find a local nonprofit organization (e.g., food bank, church, Salvation Army) to act as fiscal host for the BP. Approach the organization and sell the project.
- 2. Becoming a nonprofit entity.** Check out the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (mncn.org), which provides excellent information about becoming a nonprofit entity that is generally applicable. Obtaining nonprofit status will take at least 8-9 months. Having an attorney assist with the process can be very helpful, but if the lawyer is working pro bono, the task may take longer than it would otherwise, since it may not be a high priority.

III. Partnership with Schools. Developing an excellent partnership with the schools is essential for BPs. The schools provide a central location and safe environment for distribution of the foodpacks, and their faculty and staff members are in a great position to identify children who might need food assistance. While a counselor or other staff member might be the primary BP contact and facilitator within a particular school, the entire faculty and staff should be encouraged to get involved.

IV. The Children to be Served. The last day of each school week is traumatic for a lot of children, as is the last day of each school year, because hunger is staring them in the face. BPs help alleviate this stress.

A. Eligibility guidelines. Eligibility guidelines for a child's participation vary among BPs and are often dependent on available project funding. Some BPs limit participation to students already enrolled in the school's free lunch program; others, to students receiving *either* free *or* reduced-cost lunches; for some BPs, no eligibility requirement exists. (In the latter case, total enrollment in the free/reduced lunch program is still regarded as a significant indicator of need within the school district.)

B. Identifying children to participate. One way or another, this task is typically managed by the schools. Each school district does it a little differently; even within a single district, individual schools may use unique approaches. In some buildings the identification of children is entirely the responsibility of faculty and staff; in others, the responsibility belongs more to the students' parents/guardians; sometimes a hybrid of these two approaches develops. Whichever method of identifying children (*see general descriptions below*) is used, don't second-guess it. The school should own this responsibility.

- 1. Children identified by school faculty/staff.** This method of identifying children usually takes one of two forms. In the first case, school personnel develop a list of the students they believe should participate, then report the total number to the BP. In the second case, school personnel also create a tentative list of students, but then they contact the children's parents/guardians to seek their consent; once permission is granted, the children's names are added to the BP roll.

2. Children identified by parents/guardians. With this method of identifying children, parents/guardians must contact the school (and perhaps complete a consent form) to sign up their youngsters for the BP.

3. Combination of the two approaches. For example: A school generally uses method (b) to identify children. However, a teacher realizes that a certain child in her classroom should probably be served by the BP but hasn't yet been signed up by his parents. The teacher (or another school representative) finds a way of contacting the family and exploring the possibility.

C. The use of a registration or consent form. Some schools and/or BPs choose to use a parental registration or consent form while others don't. Weigh the demands and dynamics within your own situation.

1. Distribution of forms. The form can be distributed in a variety of ways: through school district and/or BP websites; at school registration, orientation and/or other back-to-school events; in weekly classroom folders sent home with the children; in grade card envelopes; at parent-teacher conferences; through local agencies and organizations and events serving the same population (e.g., school supply giveaways); through pastors and ministerial associations, etc. The school district's food services director, who is responsible for handling family applications for the free/reduced lunch program, can be an excellent ally. When communicating with parents about that program, s/he may be able to share a consent form for the BP and encourage participation. Circulate the form as widely as possible. *(A sample consent form from Brookings, which is made available in both English and Spanish, is attached.)*

2. Return of forms. Regardless of how copies of the form are distributed, once filled out they should all be returned to the same place—usually the school, where they are all routed to the BP's key contact there (e.g., a particular counselor). That person will be the "master listkeeper," keeping track of which students are participating and reporting to the BP the number of foodpacks needed each week. Less often, the forms are returned not to the schools but to a BP representative who serves as listkeeper.

3. Potential difficulties with forms. Sometimes parents forget to turn forms in, or lose them, or can't read them, or can't understand them. Be persistent; provide constant reminders that the BP exists and hand out additional copies of the form throughout the school year. Provide the form in languages other than English, if possible, per the needs of the community. Allow verbal consent to be given. Some difficulties, however, can't be overcome, despite best intentions and efforts. For example, school staff may be aware of children who desperately need the food assistance but whose parents won't sign the form allowing them to participate.

D. Maintaining the list of currently participating students. In some BPs the list of currently participating students is maintained by a school staffer, such as a counselor, who regularly reports the total number of students to the appropriate BP representative. In other BPs the list of names is maintained by a project representative who is in regular contact with the schools. Whoever keeps the list faces a challenge, particularly as the number of students grows. The list constantly changes as children move in and out of the school, transfer between schools in the district, opt out of the project, and so on. In almost every BP, the list is only applicable to the current school year.

- E. Maintaining a waiting list.** If a BP doesn't have enough funds to provide weekend food to all the children needing to be served, a waiting list may be kept. Maintaining such a list may seem awkward—it's hard to put children in need "on hold." However, the existence of that list can help secure additional funding, which so often depends on demonstrating need. It can also help expedite service to students once additional money becomes available.
- F. Whether or not to serve all children within the same family.** Some BPs—recognizing that adequate nutrition is especially critical during a child's earliest years, and often facing budgetary constraints—decide to focus all their efforts on serving youngsters in early childhood programs, kindergartens and elementary schools. Other BPs start with children of those ages but additionally serve their older siblings, so that no child in the family feels left out. (If attending school within the same school district, all the children in one family can be identified on a single registration or consent form. *For more about such forms, see above.*)
- G. Opting out.** Don't discourage participating families from opting out of the project if they wish.
- H. Struggling to add more students.** One BP representative expressed frustration that the number of students served by his program hasn't grown significantly in more than a year of existence, despite its operating much the same as other BPs. Hearing his description of the BP's partnership with the school district, the group offered some suggestions on how to strengthen it, and also on how to widen publicity efforts. But the group also acknowledged that some relationships between BPs and schools aren't as easy and productive as others. Work within the limits, appeal unceasingly to the larger community, and remember that sometimes progress is slow.

V. Food Matters

- A. Family-style pack or child pack.** Be clear on the mission. Who is being served—an individual child, or the entire family? What is being served—individual servings, or food for a family meal, or a combination of both? Is the mission simply to provide food, or is it also to teach nutritious eating and cooking skills, as in the "Bountiful Backpacks" project (*see footnote on p. 2*)? Consider the options. There are various ways of being effective.
- B. Menu.** Sioux Falls BP uses a set of 5 rotating weekly menus (*see attached*). Brookings BP uses the same menus, sometimes supplementing them or substituting items. Bountiful Backpacks, which provides family meals of 6-8 servings, uses a collection of 8 recipes. In developing your menus, "Do the best you can do with your donor dollars."
- C. Nutrition concerns.** All BPs would like to make the food they provide as nutritious as possible within budgetary constraints, the taste preferences of children, and the children's ability to access/fix it themselves. Healthier food is more expensive to provide and harder to get children to eat. The overriding concern is to get food into hungry bellies—if children won't eat what's provided, that purpose is defeated. What children eat on the weekend isn't going to make or break them nutritionally, *but they do need to eat*. BPs that vary their menus from week to week can take the "big picture" approach to nutrition. One week's menu may be a little high on sodium, the next a little too high on saturated fat, but is the overall nutritional quality pretty decent? Finally, nutritional requirements vary for children

of different ages, yet it's difficult to tailor the menus to every age group. There are limits on what a BP can do. Be as responsible as possible within those limits.

D. "Child-friendly" issues.

1. **Canned goods.** Some BPs include 7.5 oz. pop-top canned foods because they're easy to open and especially helpful when families don't have can openers. They tend to be more expensive, however.
2. **Weight of food.** Don't burden the students with foodpacks that are too heavy. *Feeding America* guidelines suggest that a total backpack of food should not exceed 15% of a child's weight—around 2 pounds for elementary schoolers. Most BPs at the forum said that they probably exceed that recommendation, perhaps by 2-3 pounds.
3. **Allergies and other dietary concerns.** Some BPs don't worry much about potentially problematic food items, trusting the children and their parents to sort out foods that must be avoided. Other BPs try to avoid supplying foods that are common allergens (e.g., nuts, dairy). Finally, some BPs accommodate special dietary concerns (e.g., allergies, diabetic, kosher) by asking for such information on a registration or consent form. In the last case, whenever a week's menu includes a food item that a certain number of children mustn't eat, the BPs don't pack that item in that number of foodpacks; those foodpacks are then clearly marked as "special diet." (Sometimes other food items are substituted in those packs.) If using this approach, have a medical professional as well as a registered nutritionist review all menus.
4. **Foods that require preparation.** Go easy on these, as often the children are on their own. But also think like a child about the food: children often eat cereal without milk, Ramen Noodles raw, Ravioli cold....
5. **Protein sources.** These are tough. Try Ravioli, Vienna Sausages, beef jerky, beef or turkey sticks.
6. **Vegetables.** Check out vegetable cups, a relatively new product.
7. **Items you're not sure about.** Shelf-stable milk? Canned chicken or tuna? If you're not sure whether the children will eat them, give them a try—once—and then survey the children about whether to include them again. Don't try too many new things at once.

E. Food sources

1. **Food bank.** To get food from a food bank, a BP must be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, or operating through a fiscal host (e.g., school, church, agency) that has such status.
2. **Local suppliers.** Doing business with local suppliers keeps more of the money in the local economy. If there is a number of different suppliers available in the community, try to spread out the purchases (or donations!) among them. Ask them to consider giving a discount over the sale price.
3. **Food drives.** Many civic, religious, business and school groups like to do food drives instead of simply giving money for groceries. If allowing donations of food, be sure to

publicize *in detail* the food products that will be accepted, and exactly how and where they can be donated.

- F. Liability issues.** Have a registered dietician evaluate and sign off on all menus (and also check special dietary concerns, if applicable). If handling fresh unpackaged foods during packing parties, make sure that the packing leader has ServSafe certification. Finally, the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act, a federal statute, protects BPs from liability issues related to foods that have been donated.
- G. Long weekends/holiday breaks.** BPs would like to give more food before long weekends and holiday breaks to help tide the children over, but the bags get extremely heavy and the expense is greater. It's difficult to know what to do. Again, there are constraints within which projects must work.
- H. Vouchers.** One BP experimented with distributing vouchers for a half-gallon of milk, redeemable at various local stores. There was only a 38% redemption rate, for reasons unknown. Vouchers are also a possibility for eggs and bread. Investigate what's possible in your area within your budget. Survey families to see if they would make use of this service.
- I. Average cost per child per weekend.** Sioux Falls: \$3.75; Brookings: \$4.50. Bountiful Backpacks (serving a family of 6-8): \$4-5.00.

VI. Distribution Matters

- A. Container to be delivered to the child.** BPs pack a child's supply of food in one of the following: backpack, plastic grocery bag, or reusable "ziploc" bag (donated by a local supplier).
- 1. Backpack.** *Advantages:* consistent with the "backpack project" moniker; environmentally friendly because reusable. *Disadvantages:* Have to rely on child to return it each week; may not be clean when returned; child usually has another backpack to carry also; expensive unless donated; less discreet than other options.
 - 2. Plastic grocery bag.** *Advantages:* already a carrier of choice for many school children; doesn't have to be returned; can be slipped inside a child's usual backpack; no expense if donated by a local store or by retail customers recycling their bags. *Disadvantages:* Not very environmentally-friendly, although "green" bags are available (around .09 each).
 - 3. Reusable plastic bag.** *Advantages:* environmentally friendly because reusable; sturdy; can be slipped into a child's backpack. *Disadvantages:* Expensive at .14/bag (unless donated); have to rely on child to return it; may not be clean when returned.
- B. Delivery of foodpacks from packing site to schools**
- 1. Delivery container.** Most BPs use plastic totes (18-gallon size, with an estimated 8 sacks per tote); banana boxes, which are free, would also work. The Sioux Falls BP, because of the huge number of children served, uses totes in pallets.
 - 2. Delivery vehicle.** Volunteers use their own vehicles unless a BP either has its own or has access to another means of transport (e.g., rental van whose use is regularly donated

for the purpose). Consider joining with other agencies in the area that might also have need of a truck or van to jointly purchase or write a grant proposal for such a vehicle.

3. Delivery instructions. Provide delivery staff with very specific delivery instructions.

C. Distribution of foodpacks to the children by the schools

1. Distribution method. Every school system has its own distribution method;

furthermore, each school within a district tends to develop its own routine. Let the schools have ownership of the task. Avoid micromanaging. The schools know their students best. Here are some examples of distribution methods:

- a. Night janitors in an elementary school bundle the appropriate number of foodpacks for each classroom and deliver them accordingly. They are taken home by the students the next day.
- b. In some elementary schools, teachers deliver the bags to the students.
- c. One middle school does a mass distribution in the gym after an announcement is made over the intercom that participating students should come for their foodpacks.
- d. In one high school, foodpacks are placed by school staff into the students' lockers.

2. Discretion during distribution. Encourage the school staff to be as discreet as possible in distributing the foodpacks, but do so without micromanaging. As the number of participating students increases within a school, inconspicuous distribution becomes much more difficult. Privacy issues must be worked out, with sensitivity, on an individual basis. The protection of students' identities may be a greater concern in smaller communities, where people typically know one another better. Most younger children, in whatever type of community, don't worry at all about confidentiality—they're just happy to get the food, and will often discuss it or even share it with other children. Older students are generally more embarrassed to receive the food even though they may desperately want it.

The Sioux Falls BP, the oldest program represented at the forum, reports that in their three years of service they have had no complaints arising from privacy issues, despite the very diverse methods of delivery used by the 30+ participating schools in the district. Though privacy is a serious matter, they urge BPs not to overthink this issue.

D. Distribution of non-food items in foodpacks. A BP may periodically include non-food items in the children's foodpacks. Examples of such items include holiday-related novelties, pencils, toothbrushes, notices of community events that might be helpful to the families (e.g., coat giveaway, free dental clinic); a list of relevant community agencies, organizations and resources. Sometimes these items are added by the BP itself, other times they are donated by school staff or a community group. If receiving many "outside" requests to distribute materials through the foodpacks, a BP might wish to establish a clear policy about which kinds of things it will distribute and those it won't (e.g., materials promoting a particular religious or political point of view). *Note:* BPs that are interested in distributing free free toothbrushes may seek them from the American Dental Association or (in South Dakota) Delta Dental; at least two new brushes per year per child are recommended.

E. Food-related instructions. Some BPs periodically include a sheet of food-related instructions in the foodpacks. This sheet might include a “food budget,” encouraging the children not to eat all the food right away but rather to use certain items at certain meal or snack times; or, it might say, “If a food item must be prepared with hot water, please ask an adult for help,” and other helpful suggestions.

VII. Calendar Matters. Most BPs hold their weekly packing parties on Wednesday night. This schedule best fits the calendars of their school(s) and early education site(s), and it also suits many volunteers from church groups. But there are other models. One BP is considering a move to Tuesday night in order to better accommodate its early childhood sites, but it is unclear how the shift would affect the availability of packers. Another BP packs Tuesday during the day, but it currently serves only 35 students; as it grows and requires more volunteer help, it may need to change to an evening packing schedule. Finally, one BP always packs the night before the last day of the school week.

A. Preparing for the start of the school year. Around a month before the start of the school year, most BPs (in partnership with the schools) start estimating the number of students they will serve when classes begin. Obviously there are different ways to do this. In Milbank, for example, children sign up for the BP during school registration, held three weeks before school starts. In places where students don’t have to sign up to participate, the school and/or BP may base its estimate on the number of children who are eligible for free/reduced lunches, or on statistics from the end of the previous academic year. However a BP arrives at its initial projections, the numbers will firm up once the school year gets underway.

B. First delivery of food in the new school year. Some BPs begin serving children the first week of the school year, while others wait until a few weeks after the start of school, as students and staff get more settled, their time together grows less hectic and relationships between them begin to build.

VIII. Staging Site. The choice of staging site, where inventory can be stored and packing parties held, varies from project to project. For example, a BP may work out of a local food bank or pantry, a kitchen at a school, a storage room in a church or nonprofit agency, or a building whose use is donated.

IX. Fundraising Matters. Hungry school children need to be fed—“everybody gets it.” So a BP will sell itself, to great degree, as long as people know about it. The primary issue, therefore, is how to raise awareness of the BP and keep it in the public eye (*see “Publicity” below*). The more aware the public is, the less actual fundraising the BP has to do on its own. That said, here are some fundraising strategies:

A. General appeal to the community. Milbank BP has raised \$18,000 this way since December, 2009 (around 3½ months). Sioux Falls BP has a budget of around half a million dollars a year, yet usually has only 5-6 donations in excess of \$10,000; most of their funding comes from individual donors giving modest amounts. Sioux Falls sends custom return-address labels as a thank-you to donors.

B. Sponsorship of children. Figure out how much it will cost per academic year to feed one child in the project. Encourage people to sponsor a child for that amount. Sioux Falls gives

every child sponsor a clear sticker for their rear car window that reads “I’m a Backpack Buddy.” (Note: Static cling stickers were found not to work very well, because they were damaged by car washing.)

- C. Corporate fundraising.** Invite local businesses to get involved with fundraising as well as packing parties. For example, some companies allow employees to wear jeans one day a week in return for putting some money “in the pot,” with the proceeds then donated to a charity chosen by the workers. That would be a great BP fundraiser, but you have to get the company on board. As another example, the university food services’ employee association at South Dakota State decided to donate a case of fresh fruit each week.
- D. Faith-based fundraising.** Invite local communities of faith to get involved. In Sioux Falls one church decided it wanted to sponsor 200 backpacks in its neighborhood school.
- E. School-based fundraising.** Often there are classes or groups within the schools being served whose help can be enlisted. More often, such groups will step forward to volunteer a fundraising effort, such as a “penny war” among classrooms.
- F. Special fundraising events.** It’s better if groups in the community organize, promote and carry off bake sales, garage sales, benefit concerts, etc., in support of a BP instead of the BP having to do it.
- G. Grantwriting.** There’s no magic formula for landing grants, no miracle list of “for-sure” funders. Do the research. Try to get an experienced grantwriter involved. Seek grants especially through local and regional foundations and area hospitals.
- H. Special occasion gift opportunities.** Encourage individuals and groups to give a donation to the BP as a special gift at holiday, birthday or anniversary time, or in honor/memory of someone.
- I. Virtual food drive.** A BP can set up an online food drive through Aidmatrix.org. (*View an example on the “How You Can Help Us” page at www.brookingsbackpackproject.org.*) Donors buy virtual food, raising money for the BP. Aidmatrix collects a small transaction fee for each donation.
- J. Encourage use of GoodSearch and GoodShop.** [GoodSearch](#) is a Yahoo-powered search engine that donates a penny per search to any charity the user designates. Use it like any search engine and make money for your BP while you do—it costs nothing, and the pennies add up. [GoodShop](#) is an online shopping mall that donates a percentage of each purchase to your favorite cause.
- K. Mailer soliciting donations.** This obviously costs money, but it’s worth considering. Sioux Falls BP tried this for the first time in August, 2009. The effort was “marginally successful.”
- L. Strike a partnership with your local newspaper.** Here’s an excellent example: In 2007 Sioux Falls BP was named the beneficiary of the *Argus Leader’s* “Lend a Hand” campaign, meant to help raise funds for a local nonprofit organization.² During the campaign (mid-October through mid-December), the newspaper ran once-weekly articles about the BP, both to educate the public and encourage donations. A total of \$120,000 was raised,

² Published in Sioux Falls, the *Argus Leader* is South Dakota’s largest newspaper.

exceeding the goal of \$40,000. In 2008 the newspaper again offered its support, and \$170,000 was collected. In 2009, the total climbed to \$220,000.

M. Be a good beggar. Swallow your pride (or your shyness) for the children’s sake and ask, ask, ask for what your BP needs. You never know where the help might come from.

X. Publicity Matters

A. Develop solid publicity materials. They don’t have to be fancy or expensive, but they need to communicate effectively. Consider creating flyers, church bulletin inserts, posters, a website, a speaker’s bureau, etc. Prepare a basic five-minute speech for use at churches on Sunday mornings; develop a longer presentation (possibly even a PowerPoint) for use at local civic organizations.

B. Develop your own logo. Ask a local graphic designer to donate his or her services. Check with your United Way to see if it has a corporate partner who has agreed to help with such things. If you have a college or university nearby, see if a graphic design student might develop a logo (or other publicity materials) as a special project.

C. Use props. Keep a sample foodpack handy for public presentations. People like tangible illustrations of what the BP is doing. A foodpack can also be used at parent/teacher conferences or other school events where information about the BP is being presented to parents.

D. Educate the community. It’s not unusual for a community at large to be ignorant of, or in denial about, the amount of hunger faced by its most vulnerable members, including children. Share information. Raise awareness. Help people realize that hunger is a local phenomenon.

E. Use sensitive language. In publicity materials, don’t use words like “food-insecure,” “poverty,” etc. Avoid labeling the overall situation in the homes of participating students. Keep the language simple. For example: “Our mission is to help feed children who don’t have enough to eat on weekends.”

F. Use testimonials. Statements of support and anecdotes from recipients of the food (children and/or parents), from teachers and counselors, from school administrators—these are all wonderful for publicity.

G. Think outside the box. Publicize through avenues that might not first come to mind. For example, Sioux Falls BP distributes information about its services through the school district’s Homeless Outreach Coordinator.

H. Don’t forget to educate the children. A school counselor working with the Milbank BP visits every class to talk with them about childhood hunger in general, the BP in particular, and how participating children can open containers, fix foods, etc.

XI. Staffing Issues

A. Share the work. Running a BP takes hard work. Enlist volunteers not just to help with packing parties but also to carry out vital day-to-day activities. Common themes among the side conversations during the forum were *tiredness* and *not having enough help to get*

things done—yet no BP was older than three years. To prevent burnout, grow the volunteer pool, and ask those folks what skills they would be interested in sharing with the BP. Loudly advertize what skills you’re looking for. Finally, consider establishing term limits, especially in key volunteer positions, to keep “new blood” circulating through the organization. While they needn’t be hard and fast, such limits make clear what the expectations are when new volunteers are recruited; furthermore, they can allow volunteers to take a break or make a change without feeling guilty.

B. Volunteers

- 1. Volunteer age.** Despite concerns about discretion and confidentiality, especially in smaller communities, most BPs represented at the forum allow children within the schools and youth groups from faith-based and civic organizations to volunteer at packing parties. Some youngsters even help with distribution of foodpacks. Involving young people (and their families) can be a good way of educating them about hunger and poverty and volunteerism. Some school districts have community service requirements for their students—a wonderful partnership can develop. Should there be a minimum age for volunteers? Most BPs don’t have one—yet. One BP suggested as a guideline that anyone younger than middle school should be working one-on-one with an adult. A BP should determine the optimal number of volunteers (actual working bodies) for its staging site, then make sure to communicate that limit ahead of time to packing party volunteers. Very young children have obvious physical limitations; they cannot count as working bodies, but they do take up space, so this must be taken into consideration if allowing them to help or accompany their parents.
- 2. Caution about parents.** Sometimes parents of volunteers seek special publicity for their children’s packing or fundraising efforts. Avoid giving in to such pressure, as it sends a very mixed message about the motives for volunteering, plus it’s unfair to all those volunteers who do so quietly and without need for recognition. If parents want publicity, let them do it themselves.
- 3. Volunteer pool.** The tendency in most BPs is to create and involve as large a pool of volunteers as possible, as opposed to relying on a smaller group of dedicated, seasoned volunteers. This helps prevent volunteer fatigue while also developing community loyalty to the organization and enlarging the donor base. It will probably still be necessary, though, to have some “core volunteers” in key positions.
- 4. Parent-Teacher Organization.** The PTO is a good source of potential volunteers, not only for packing parties but also for publicity, delivery of foodbags to the schools, fundraising and more. Develop a partnership with the PTO leadership.

B. Establish an advisory committee. This committee can give helpful feedback periodically on the BP from a variety of angles. There could be representatives on the committee from the school district, religious organizations, the business sector, the media, local government, and so on.

XII. Data Collection, Surveying and Observational Research

A. Data collection. A common concern in the public is that a BP is “just another entitlement program.” Data collection can help make clear that a BP is an important asset to students,

families, schools and the larger community. Data can complement anecdotal observations and testimonials. It is also useful, if not indispensable, in writing grant proposals and appealing to donors. An example of data collection is found under “Surveys” (*immediately below*). In addition: The school nurse working with the Mankato BP is tallying on Mondays how many student visits to her office are due to hunger, illness, accident and so on; statistics prior to and after the start of the BP will be compared.

Other interesting data questions that might be asked include: “What changes, if any, are teachers seeing in their classes on Mondays since the inception of the BP?” “Is school attendance up on Friday, when food is distributed?” It isn’t easy to measure the benefits of a BP, because cause-and-effect relationships aren’t always clear, and the variables are numerous. Simple conclusions can’t be drawn from test scores or changes in behavior. Nor can success be judged solely by the number of children a BP serves.

Suzanne Stluka at the South Dakota State University has a special interest in data collection concerning BPs in South Dakota. For more information please see “Addendum: Special Opportunities” (*contact information provided on the attached “Contacts List”*).

B. Surveys. Although the return rate may be 20% or less on many surveys, this tool is very useful for collecting data and getting feedback on a variety of matters from children, parents, school counselors and more. (If using a registration or consent form for the BP, you can ask on that document if a family is willing to participate in surveys, but it isn’t necessary; folks who don’t wish to participate, won’t.) Some surveys, particularly those addressed to volunteers or school staff, can easily be done online. (*One good tool for this is <http://www.SurveyMonkey.com>.*)

The Mankato BP asks participating children to complete a simple survey six times during the school year. Administered by teachers, the survey asks the students (who are in elementary school) to rate their hunger level over the weekend by choosing one of three face-pictures—smiling, neutral and frowning. Mankato obtained survey templates from the BP in St. Joseph, Missouri (<http://www.stjoefoodbank.org/BackpackBuddies.htm>).

C. Observational research. Work with a local university, if possible, to set up a research project. In Mankato researchers in clinical psychology did classroom observation on Mondays before the BP started and are continuing, now that it has begun.

XIII. Summertime Program. In many communities federally-funded summer feeding programs already exist, operating on much the same basis as free/reduced cafeteria lunches during the school year. They provide hot meals to children who qualify, Monday through Friday, at designated sites (e.g., Boys & Girls Club, Salvation Army). Once a BP has become established in a community, and if it has the money and means, it might consider partnering with such a program (and various other local agencies and organizations) so that it can serve children on summer weekends. Distribution during the summer is a challenge because there is no longer a central location to give the food to all the children; another challenge is identification of which children should participate. But by partnering with feeding program sites, as well as other locations (e.g., cooperating churches), BPs can overcome these obstacles. Consider starting a summertime program by designating a certain number of foodbags for each cooperating site. Continue to gauge the demand, and adjust accordingly. Because of the

logistical challenges, the number of children served by a BP during the summer will most likely be lower than during the school year.

XIV. Cooperative Extension Service. The federally-funded Cooperative Extension Service exists to educate communities in a variety of specialties. The Family Nutrition Program, as part of the Extension Service, helps teach the importance of making healthier food choices and also explores ways that families can better provide for themselves nutritionally when resources are limited. To discuss how your BP might partner with the FNP at South Dakota State University, contact Suzanne Stluka or Tyke Knudson (*see attached "Contacts List"; also be sure to read the pertinent attached materials*). If you live outside South Dakota, check out your local FNP.

XV. Online Information and Discussion. "Backpack Food Projects," an online discussion group, has now been set up (<http://groups.google.com/group/backpack-food-projects>) so that people involved in BPs can network, information-share and problem-solve. It is a public group.

A. Membership. Anybody can read the discussions, but to participate fully in the group (e.g., post your own questions, share suggestions, upload documents), you must become a member. To do that, you must have an email address and a Google account; then you must either answer an invitation to become a member (everyone associated with the March forum will receive an invitation) or visit the group and click "Join this group."

If you don't already have a free Google account, go to Google.com, click "Sign in," click "Create account now," and follow the instructions. Once you have your account, join. When you are notified that you have been granted full access as a member, log on and edit your "membership settings." For example, if you think that you might have trouble remembering to regularly log onto the group, go to "Edit My Membership" and request that new posts be emailed to you—that way you won't have to remember to visit the group. If you reply to any of those emails, your messages will automatically appear online in the discussion threads—again, you won't have to log onto the group to participate.

B. Management. Once you are a member of the discussion group, you will automatically be a manager as well, as this group is fully democratic, and unmoderated. All member-managers are free to start new discussion threads, add new pages and files, etc. However, please do not alter any "Group Settings" without first checking with the larger membership.

C. Inviting others to join. Once you're a member, you may invite other people to join the discussion group. Click "Invite Members" in the sidebar, then enter the email addresses of the persons you wish to invite, separated by commas. Follow the on-screen instructions.

SEE ADDENDA IN SECOND ATTACHMENT.