Back-to-school is an exciting time for children and their parents, but for many children, it also means regaining access to meals they rely on. One in four kids in Arkansas struggle with food insecurity and don’t know if there will be a meal when they get home. Many throughout central and southern Arkansas rely on free and reduced price lunches at school for daily nourishment, but nights and weekends can be a struggle to find food. The Backpack Program at Arkansas Foodbank provides easy-to-prepare, nutritious packs of food for kids to take home on the weekends to ensure they have something to eat. At Clinton Elementary School in Van Buren County, food insecurity has never been more prevalent.

“I have had students and parents of students who have never been on my list show up and ask for a food bag,” the Backpack Program Coordinator at Clinton Elementary said. “During the pandemic, students started eating breakfast in their classrooms, and the number of students teachers have reported as eating extra or requesting more to eat has increased.”

This increase is echoed in stories from schools all around the state. From Beebe to Marvell and Elaine to Pine Bluff, schools are seeing more need and more dependence on weekend food from our Backpack Program. When students are distracted by hunger, they cannot learn. Schools, like Wonderview High School in Conway County, are seeing the positive impact regular access to food has on their students.

“A student will seem shy and will not open up to you,” the Backpack Program Coordinator at Wonderview High School said. “But after putting them in the Backpack Program, you can tell that they see you care, will start to open up to you, and share their stories with you.”

“We are so grateful to have the Backpack Program.”
Backpacks Help Fill The Gap

During this time of rising food and gas prices, our kids are at risk to feel it the worst. In Arkansas, the number of children who don’t know where their next meal will come from is staggering: 1 in 4, and in rural parts of our state, that number is as high as 1 in 3.

Programs like the Backpack Program help fill the gap when families cannot provide all the food children need with easy-to-prepare, nourishing food over the weekend. When we finalized plans for the 2022 Backpack Program in November of last year, we didn’t fully anticipate the sharp and drastic increase in the cost of food and the increased need among kids.

We have already distributed almost 60,000 backpacks during the 2022 spring semester.

“We are projecting the 30% increase in the cost of food to continue throughout this year.”

This will affect our bottom line and put a strain on our ability to provide extra support to children over extended breaks such as the holidays.

Because of your support, we can provide children with consistent access to food they need to grow and thrive. Thank you for your partnership and thank you for bringing hope to those who need it most.

In gratitude,

Rhonda Sanders
CEO

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Tommy and Carolyn are part of a group of friends that come the last Tuesday of every month to the food distribution at the Arkansas Foodbank’s Delta Branch. They arrive around 1 a.m. for the 8:30 a.m. start — both traveling several miles roundtrip to receive food each month.

Tommy worked hard his entire life, but in retirement he struggles with his disability. He was asked to fill out his consent form and then struggled to sign his name. “My nerves in my back and hands are shot,” he said. “But I’m not complaining.”

He shared how hard it is to pay for all the other bills and still have anything left for food.

“What the food bank gives us is such a big help."

“Before coming here, I sure as heck couldn’t make ends meet. I can tell the difference at the end of the month.” Tommy is so grateful for the food he can get each month at the Arkansas Foodbank Delta Branch.

Carolyn said she just loves all the vegetables we get. Irish potatoes (an old-timer term for Idaho potatoes, she said) and sweet potatoes are her most favorite, but she also loves the rice and pinto beans.

Help — When It Is Needed Most

This food helps Carolyn free up money to make sure she can pay her light bill and other bills. “Groceries seem to be getting higher now when we need food the most.”
Logging **more than 300 volunteer hours** since 2020, Lisa Hall is recognized as Arkansas Foodbank’s volunteer of the quarter. Every week Lisa donates her time as a volunteer in our Little Rock Branch’s Volunteer Center. At the Volunteer Center, she helps with sorting and packing food, labeling cans, and making food boxes for our Food For Kids and Food For Seniors programs.

“I love the experience I have at the Foodbank.”

“It’s wonderful, the environment is welcoming, and I have friendly interactions with the Arkansas Foodbank Volunteer Engagement staff and other volunteers each time I come to the VOC for a volunteer shift.”

With dedicated volunteers like Lisa, we can keep our programs running, pantries equipped, and food going out the door to the neighbors that need it most.