

Backpack Program Delivers Healthy Food to Households

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We live in a country of abundance and prosperity. Yet, we also live in a country of poverty and disparity. There is enough food produced in the United States to feed every man, woman and child. Yet every day 40 million people live with chronic food insecurity. Of those 40 million people, 12.5 million are children.

In the St. Louis region where I and many others work to combat hunger, 125,000 children live at or below the federal poverty level — a condition that almost always equates to missed meals and hunger. Since nutrition affects cognitive, social and emotional development, children who do not get the proper foods are more likely to have problems learning, growing and interacting.

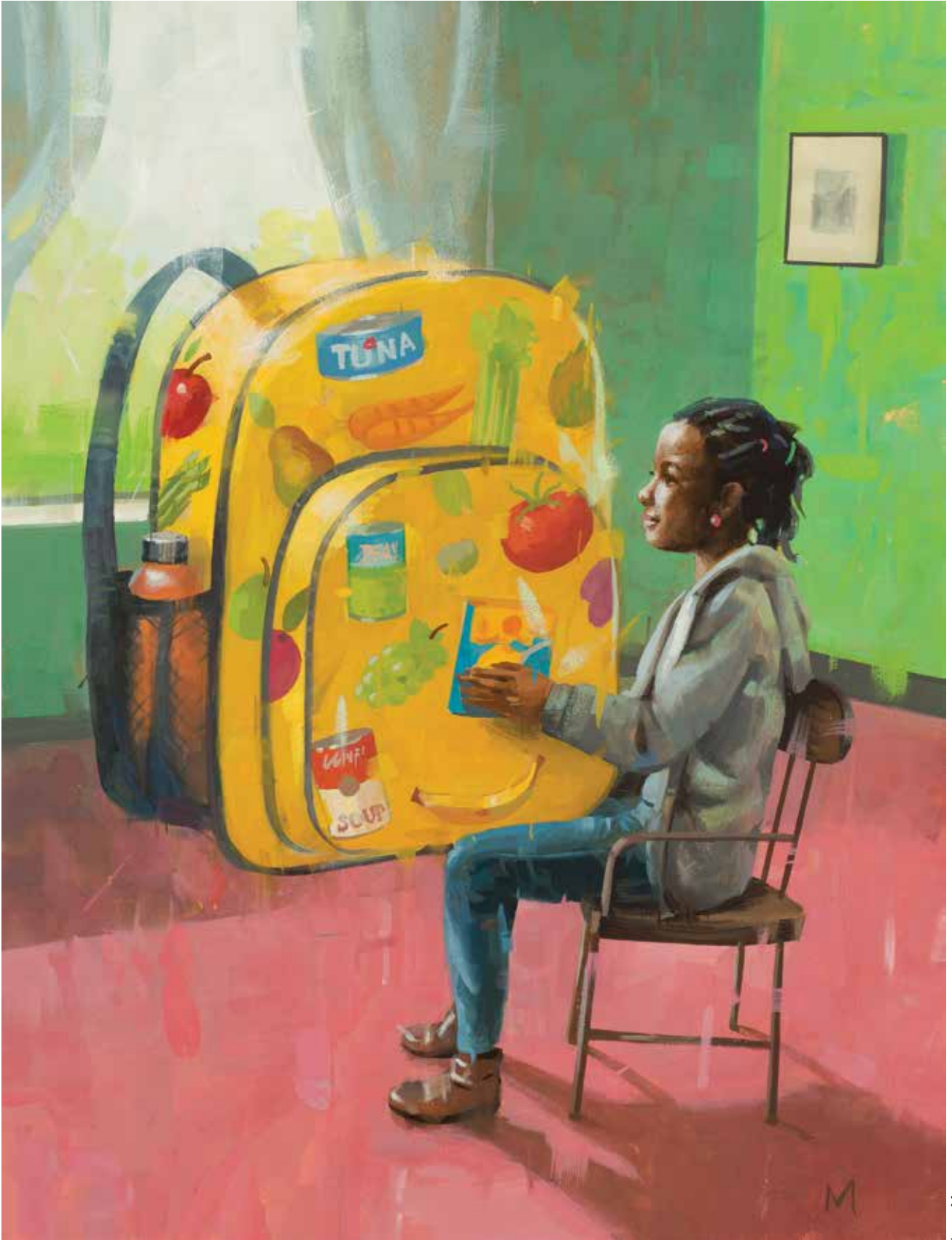
With 37 years of proven service to our community, Operation Food Search is a leading nonprofit in hunger relief, serving the city of St. Louis and 30 surrounding counties in Missouri and Illinois. Beyond food collection and distribution, Operation Food Search has initiated innovative programs that reach deeper in the community to help break the cycle of poverty. Nutrition education is an important component in the fight against hunger as increasing numbers of low-income individuals suffer from obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and other nutrition-related illnesses.

The ravages of childhood hunger and the epidemic proportions of the problem propelled Operation Food Search to focus on the hundreds

of thousands of children in our community who needlessly suffer from the effects of undernutrition. The devastating effects of hunger derail youngsters from normal development and rob them of a happy childhood. Beyond that, the angst and stress of childhood hunger set the stage for a compromised adulthood.

In 1999 Operation Food Search was receiving calls from teachers, administrators and social workers asking us if there was something we could do. Their children were returning to school on Monday saying they had little, sometimes no food over the weekend. We developed a new, now signature, program to address childhood hunger called Operation Backpack. Before the weekend or a holiday vacation, participating children receive a backpack filled with shelf-stable, nutritious and easy to prepare food. Households empty the backpacks and children return them to school the next week to be refilled.

Operation Backpack targets children living below the federal poverty level; it serves the poorest and hungriest children. Schools located



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in low-income communities serve as the distribution sites for the program. A large percentage of children in these schools qualify for free and reduced-cost meals during the week. However, during the weekend many of the children live in homes with little and sometimes no nutritious food in the house.

Each week participating children receive nutritionally dense foods including tuna or canned chicken, soups with meat or beans, macaroni and cheese, canned ravioli, cereal, instant oatmeal packets, granola bars, canned fruits and vegetables. The foods in the backpacks help ensure children have proper nourishment over the weekend or school break.

MEETING NEEDS

Hunger can be difficult to spot in the United States, though it is exhibited in a variety of ways. Chronically hungry children may exhibit extreme thinness, puffy or swollen skin, chronically dry and cracked lips, dry and itchy eyes. Hungry children may have excessive absences and tardiness from school, have a short attention span and inability to concentrate, and have behavior problems such as hyperactivity, irritability and anxiousness. They may live in families who move frequently, have had loss of income and are in a family crisis situation.

It's impossible to describe the feeling of joy that prevails as children accept their individual backpacks full of food each Friday. There are tears of gratitude from parents when children come home from school with their backpacks.

A school nurse at one of the participating schools described how a good number of children depend heavily on the backpacks. She informed us that even if the students are absent on Friday, many of the parents go out of their way to pick up their son or daughter's backpack as it is an important source of food over the weekend.

One little fourth grader told us that her family routinely runs out of food. She was very happy she could receive the backpack food each Friday because otherwise she would not have enough to eat over the weekend. It was a bittersweet day when a third grade boy told us he was so glad to receive the food each week because "now I can help my family."

A GROWING RESPONSE

Operation Backpack has been a magnet for volunteers and financial supporters. Serving 100 children in 1999, the program has grown so that it currently provides 8,100 backpacks in 60 school districts. It didn't take long for these volunteers and philanthropists to ask what happens to the children during the summer months when the children don't receive the free school meals and don't receive weekend backpacks.

Operation Food Search responded by offering a summer meals program to ensure low-income children receive nutritious meals when school is not in session. Free meals that meet federal nutrition guidelines are provided to children 18 years old and under at approved sites with significant concentrations of low-income children. The St. Louis County Library was one of the first partners that came on board to serve summer meals. Kristen Sorth, director of the St. Louis County Library system, said, "St. Louis County Library has had a strong partnership with Operation Food Search for the past several years. Providing after-school meals and summer lunches has been a great opportunity to continue that partnership and help fight childhood hunger by providing access to healthy options while promoting literacy and learning throughout the school year."

The lunch and meal program provided nearly 100,000 meals during the summer of 2018 with plans for continued expansion. Beyond that, Operation Food Search also has offered after-school meals that provide snacks and suppers in organized after-school programs.

The suffering that widespread hunger brings requires a response. In addition to hunger relief programs currently being offered, our lawmakers need to be targeted to change the political will to end this pervasive problem. Everyone throughout every community should have access to and understand the healing power of food.

SUNNY SCHAEFER, retired in February 2019, was Operation Food Search executive director for 22 years overseeing food distribution to feed the hungry in the St. Louis metropolitan area and expanding Operation Food Search services to include nutrition education and multiple childhood hunger relief programs.

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