



Media Release

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Ozarks Food Harvest's Backpack Program expanding to feed more hungry kids

SPRINGFIELD—Ozarks Food Harvest is expanding its Weekend Backpack Program™ to two additional schools in the area for the 2010–2011 school year, bringing the total participating schools to 30. The program provides backpacks full of nutritious child-friendly food items for local food insecure children to take home over the weekends when they do not have access to the free and reduced lunch and breakfast program or after-school feeding programs like The Food Bank's Kids Cafe® sites.

"Hundreds of children in the Ozarks go to school with the secret of not having enough food at home," said Bart Brown, president/CEO at Ozarks Food Harvest. "These kids experiencing hunger have difficulty concentrating, are often sick, socially withdrawn or rebellious and less likely to excel academically. Our backpack program provides a solution."

The Weekend Backpack Program™ will grow from 28 Ozarks schools to 30 when schools start next month. Ozarks Food Harvest says more than half of the schools in its 28 county service area have free and reduced meal participation rates of 50 percent and greater. Some schools' rates are as high as 90 percent.

This anonymous program ensures that the most at-risk children receive backpacks to supplement their diets over the weekend. By training school staff to identify the signs childhood hunger, The Food Bank is able to pinpoint children who are in most need of support. Each Friday, participating schools provide these children with backpacks filled with nutritious, easy-open food items.

"I rest easier knowing that each weekend our neediest children are going home with a backpack full of high quality, nutritious food," said Josh Phillips, principal at Hurley Elementary, which has a 60 percent free and reduced rate. "The real thank you messages come from the students themselves, who perhaps don't express their gratitude in words, but through increased attention spans, greater amounts of energy, better attendance rates, improved grades and the smile that comes with knowing where your next meal is coming from."

Missouri also has the fifth highest rate of child food insecurity in the nation, according to new research released this month. More than 23 percent of Missouri children suffer from food insecurity—a 3.2 percent increase.

—More—

Transform Hunger into Hope™ at ozarksfoodharvest.org

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The Food Bank's Weekend Backpack Program™ nutritionist-developed menu provides the necessary nutrition a growing child needs. Foods selected include items like shelf stable soups, pasta meals, cereals, 100% juice, milk and dried fruits. Due to selectivity of the backpack's ingredients, Ozarks Food Harvest is required to purchase the specific food items for the program, making support for this program extremely important to its continued success.

The benefitting children also learn responsibility from OFH's Weekend Backpack Program™ because they are responsible for bringing the backpacks back to school to be refilled each week.

Ozarks Food Harvest was one of the first Feeding America® food banks to establish a backpack program, in 2003. Funds from organizations such as Female Leaders in Philanthropy (a United Way initiative), the City of Springfield Community Development Block Grant, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks and other local foundations, businesses and individuals help to sustain the program in individual schools.

Individuals can become a Backpack Buddy with a \$300 donation to the program, which fills a backpack every weekend of the school year. A \$10 donation will help fill one child's backpack for the weekend. Gifts can be made securely online at <http://www.ozarksfoodharvest.org/money.html>.

About Ozarks Food Harvest

Ozarks Food Harvest is the only food bank in southwest Missouri, serving more than 300 hunger relief organizations across 28 Ozarks counties. The Food Bank reaches more than 155,000 individuals and distributes 8.5 million pounds of food annually (July 1, 2009–June 30, 2010)—a value of \$14,280,000 distributed to its Network of member charities—making Ozarks Food Harvest one of the largest philanthropic institutions in southwest Missouri. This is made possible due to its network of charities and direct-relief programs such as the Weekend Backpack Program™, Kids Cafe® and the Mobile Food Pantry™ program. Learn more at ozarksfoodharvest.org and at facebook.com/ozarksfoodharvest.

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Logo available upon request.

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