

SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF BILLINGS

BRIGHT EYES BACKPACK PROGRAM

Soroptimist of Billings has made stamping out childhood hunger our identifying club project. The members of Soroptimist have named our identifying project Bright Eyes. The Bright eyes project works in conjunction with the Billings School District 2 Backpack Program.

The Backpack Meal Program in the Billings School District began as an effort to address chronic hunger amongst our district's poorest students. The Backpack Meals Program provides weekend and holiday meals to children enrolled in the Free and Reduced School Meals Programs at the Billings Title 1 Public Elementary Schools.

- * Over 5600 K-12 students (38% of the total student population) participate in the Billings School Systems Free and Reduced School Meals Program each school day. And, several hundred eligible high school students don't partake due to the stigma of eating lunch on campus .
- * About 10% of the Free and Reduced Lunch students go hungry outside of school.
- * Only 2100 Free and Reduced Lunch students live in neighborhoods that meet the Federal Title 1 criterion. Thus 3500 students are not served by the two valuable hunger abatement programs: The Backpack Meals Program (on school year weekends and holidays) and Summer-In -The - Park.
- * At least 524 homeless children attend Billings Public Schools each year.
- * Despite low unemployment, MT's per capita income ranks 46th - 48th of 50 states because most jobs are in the low-paying service and hospitality sectors
- * About 53% of Yellowstone County children age birth to 18 years live at or below 185% of the federal poverty level
- * Families need to earn 200% of the federal poverty level in order to achieve food security

The Billings School District 2 Backpack Program began in fall 2009- spring 2010. The food for the Backpack Program is purchased through the Montana Food Bank Network. Each Thursday, during the school year, The Backpack Program coordinators Dr. Ginny Mermel and Karen Dawson meet with a team of Billings School District 2 vocational students at the district warehouse.

Under Ginny and Karen's direction, the students pack and label the boxes containing the required number of Backpack Meals for each participating school. Boxes are then placed on the appropriate warehouse loading ramps and delivered each Friday morning to the participating schools by a fleet of SD-2 delivery trucks that deliver cafeteria meals and mail. A volunteer at each school (often the school secretary) will receive the boxes and make sure the meal bags are discretely passed on to the needy students.

The physical discomfort, stress and low energy experienced by chronically hungry students often distracts them from their lessons and causes them to be a distraction to others. Principals and teachers in the participating Billings Title 1 Schools report a significant drop in behavioral problems in children receiving the Backpack Meals. The students who once dreaded weekends remain calm on Fridays because they know they will have food to take home with them. Within one month, there was significant improvement in school work and standardized test scores among the children receiving Backpack Meals.

Chronic hunger during childhood impairs physical, emotional and intellectual growth and development. These impairments manifest as developmental delay, early onset of chronic diseases, decreased academic performance and low earning potential during adulthood. Locally, in Billings, chronically hungry children are four times as likely to drop out of school as are their better fed peers. School drop outs are likely to continue and become part of the cycle of generational poverty. Children who are chronically hungry and/or drop out of school are also at risk of a variety of social problems such as incarceration, substance abuse, and for girls, teen pregnancy.

This year, an Americorp Vista volunteer will be working with administrators and staff at Billings Non Title 1 Elementary Schools to determine which children need weekend food. The volunteer will also assist in setting up small food pantries in the Billings Middle and High Schools for students with food insecurities.

Because of the recent state and federal cutbacks, the Billings School District 2 System is unable to fund the needed Backpack Program for the chronically hungry children enrolled in the Billings Title 1 Schools, let alone the Non-Title 1 Schools.

99% of all money collected for the Billings Backpack Meals Program goes to food for the children. A little less than 1% goes to the Education Foundation for Billings Public Schools to cover overhead such as banking, accounting, tax filing and invoice paying.

We, Soroptimist of Billings, believe in our responsibility of helping to stamp out hunger in our community that we so love.