



# WEEKEND BACKPACK PROGRAM TOOLKIT

*Everything you need to start a Weekend Backpack  
Program in your Massachusetts community*



# Welcome

## **So you are interested in starting a Weekend Backpack Program in your community? We can help!**

I founded the Cambridge Weekend Backpack Program in 2013 and joined Food For Free, along with the program, in 2016. During that time, I have mentored teams in many communities to help them get started, too. The Food For Free team has put together this guide to help make it easier for other communities to start their own Weekend Backpack Programs. In this Toolkit, you'll find everything you need to know to get started.

We want to express a heartfelt note of gratitude to Hunger Free Colorado for providing the groundwork for this Massachusetts based Toolkit. Many of us who have started Weekend Backpack Programs in Massachusetts have used this valuable resource and are grateful to them for their work in this area.



*Alanna Mallon*

Founder, the Cambridge Weekend Backpack Program  
Food For Free's K-12 Strategic Advisor

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# What is a Weekend Backpack Program?

In Massachusetts, over 440,000 students qualify for free/reduced price school meals, and 1 in 5 children are considered food insecure. Our most at risk students for food insecurity are also the ones who are most affected by the achievement gap, and poor academic outcomes that can have lifelong effects. These students rely on their school cafeterias for the majority of their nutrition during the week. These supports do not exist over the weekend, so many school districts have Weekend Backpack Programs. Weekend Backpack Programs send food home discreetly on Fridays to ensure students are well fed over the weekend and can come in Monday mornings, ready to learn.

Weekend Backpack Programs are not a new idea. The first one was founded in 1995 by a school nurse in Little Rock, Arkansas who noticed that students often came to her office on Mondays complaining of stomach aches and headaches, and realized that many of these students ate little to no food over the weekend. She partnered with her local food bank, the Arkansas Rice Depot, and started sending groceries home in their backpacks on Fridays to combat the issue and noticed a change in behavior right away.

Since then, Weekend Backpack Programs have proliferated nationally, and have been shown to decrease absenteeism, behavioral trips to the principal's office, and trips the school nurse for hunger related ailments.

All of these factors lead to more instructional time in the classroom for students, which lead to better academic outcomes for children living in poverty. This is a powerful argument to make when speaking with school administration about the need for a program in your school or district.





# How to Start a Program in Your Community

As of 2019, there are over 30 Weekend Backpack Programs in Massachusetts, and more cities and towns are adding them each year as awareness grows about their efficacy in providing a critical resource to our students.

We created this Toolkit to provide background, steps to take to start a Weekend Backpack Program, forms and assessment sample documents, how to connect with your local food bank or pantry, fiscal agency, fundraising, and everything else you need to create a successful Weekend Backpack Program.



**Statewide 46% of students qualify for free and reduced price school meals.**

*Source: Report - "Ending Hunger in our Classrooms - First annual report" EOS Foundation & Children's Healthwatch*

**In 2017,  
the food insecurity  
rate in Massachusetts  
was 27% higher than it was  
10 years ago.**

*Source: Project Bread  
"Get the Facts"*





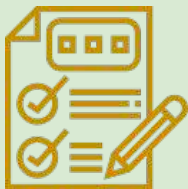
# Determining Need

## How do I know if my school needs a Weekend Backpack Program?

The first step in determining the need in your school is assessing the number of students who qualify for free/reduced price school meals. This information can be obtained from your school principal, or Project Bread's Child Nutrition Outreach Program (Massachusetts school districts only, email: [cnop@projectbread.org](mailto:cnop@projectbread.org)), which can request that information from the school nutrition department.



Massachusetts no longer tracks free/reduced price school meals information online, instead it uses a new category called "economically disadvantaged." You can view this information online at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to see a breakdown by school. Visit their site (<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>), search for your school district by typing in the search box, and then click "Schools" next to "district" in the upper right. Use the dropdown box to select the school, and click the orange arrow. Once the school comes up, click the tab marked "Students" and then click "selected populations" from the menu on the left. There is a category called *economically disadvantaged* which shows how many students direct certify into other federal anti-poverty programs, like MassHealth (<http://mass.gov/masshealth>), WIC (<http://mass.gov/wic>), or SNAP (<http://mass.gov/snap>), or students who are in foster care or homeless. Because this number does not take into account annual household income data, it is not as helpful as the free/reduced price school meals number. However, it is another data point to reference in determining need.



**Students who consistently start their day with a healthy meal had an average **17.5% increase** in their standardized math scores over students who skip breakfast.**

*Source: Share our Strength*



# What is the First Step to Getting Started?

Once you determine that there is a need for such a program in your school, the first step is to schedule a meeting with your school principal to discuss the program, the need, and how it might work. Make sure to do your homework before this meeting as it may be your only shot to sell your case!

Tips for talking with your principal:

- Have the facts about your district — What percentage of kids are eligible for free or reduced lunch? Does your city provide data on poverty levels? What food resources already exist?
- Ask that the school nurse or counselor attend the meeting as they may have anecdotal stories about students in your school that can help determine need.
- Have a plan, like the one outlined in this Toolkit, for how the program will work logistically and who will pay for it. School administrators are often overwhelmed with curriculum requirements and the program will need to be low impact on the school staff in order to be approved.
- Determine what your space needs will be before the meeting. Will you need onsite storage during the week/on Fridays? Will the bags be packed off site and delivered? These requirements will help the school administration visualize the impact on space needed, which is often at a premium.



When asking for the meeting, you can send your principal this short interview that aired on *RadioBoston* in 2014 that may be helpful in showcasing how a school principal views this program and how it's helping their families:

<https://wbur.fm/2KZbxjV>



# Funding

Funding sources can vary from program to program, and even within a program it can vary from year to year! Some programs are supported by their local food bank or food pantry, some are 100% community funded through donations, some are funded through their local or state budget. We suggest, at first, soliciting community donations to support the program, and using the opportunity to talk about childhood food insecurity in your community. Host a fundraising movie night with “A Place at the Table” (<http://www.magpictures.com/aplaceatthetable/>), have a citywide panel discussion with local anti-hunger advocates, initiate a social media campaign around childhood hunger and academic outcomes.

Raising awareness of how prevalent the issue is in your community will help with funding. Figure out how much the program will cost per child, per year, and ask people to sponsor a student, or a family for an academic school year. Local banks and organizations are great places to apply for grants to help fund the program, local grocery stores are great places to connect with for donations or discounts on food. Think about contacting your local elected officials; school committee/school board, city or town government leaders, and your State Representatives and Senators to engage them on issues of funding for your program.



## How much does it cost?

Each program is different, but a general price range to think about is between \$2.00-6.00 per bag depending on where food is purchased, how much labor is involved, and if you are purchasing in bulk.

## What if I am not set up as a non-profit? Do I need to create a non-profit?

If you aren't a non-profit and don't have a 501(c)(3) status, it is a good idea to find a non-profit that would be willing to act as your fiscal sponsor. These organizations will help administer receiving donations and paying invoices in exchange for a small administrative fee. As you grow, you may want to look for a more sustainable home for your program in a non-profit that is serving the same mission in your community.



If possible, it can be helpful to approach this non-profit in a time of success and stability in your program instead of a time of despair. Approaching the organization can be difficult, and fully preparing for this is important. Make sure to have your financials in line to show the full cost of the program, have a solid understanding or record of the number of hours spent on the program each week by staff and volunteers, and your plan for what this transition would look like.



## Who is eligible to participate in this program?

The program should be open and available to any family in the school who needs it, and should have a rolling admission process. Families may need it for a few weeks, or months, to get them through a difficult time, or need to be added mid-year due to a financial situation. Qualifying students based on participation in the free/reduced price school meals program may miss many of the very students that need the program the most. These students may have families who:

- Do not understand the federal free/reduced price school meals program form
- Whose first language isn't English
- May not have returned the form on time
- Missed the cut off by just a few dollars
- Don't want to sign a government form

When starting a program, making the time to understand the challenges and limitations of these income based programs will be critical in ensuring that any family that may benefit from having additional food on the weekend feels comfortable participating.



**10.2%**  
of Massachusetts  
households

**Approximately 723,000 adults and children are food insecure.**

*Source: USDA-ERA 2017 Household Food Insecurity Report  
(released Sept 2018)*



## How are students identified?

Each school has a student support team that consists of the principal, assistant principal, school adjustment counselor, and school nurse that meets regularly. This team would meet to discuss which students they think would most benefit from this program. It is important that they include the cafeteria manager in this conversation. The cafeteria manager is always the most knowledgeable in determining who is most in need because they know who comes back for seconds, and who steals or hoards food.

You may want to keep participants unknown to you, keeping the privacy between the families and the school. To do so, the school will need to be responsible for signing up students and maintaining an up-to-date list. The school would then share the number of students participating, and no names would be used. On the other hand you may want to have more data about the students participating each year for record keeping. It will be important to determine if your program will have this firewall, or if you will require more data sharing.

## How do students sign up?

An opt-in form should be sent home with every student at the beginning of each school year. Once the forms are returned by the families, the student support team should cross check the forms against the students they had previously determined would benefit from the Backpack Program to ensure they signed up. If there are gaps in who has signed up, the team would reach out to the family personally to see if they are interested in having their children participate. Families may not fully understand what it means to be involved in the program or if they need to meet certain requirements. This is a time to clarify. If language is a barrier, the school may have translation resources that will help explain the program to the family.

→ **Download a customizable sample opt-in in form at [FoodForFree.org](https://www.foodforfree.org)**



### Do siblings get bags?

Yes. Each child in the home should receive a weekly bag of food, otherwise they will split the food. This includes children who may be too young to attend school.



# Food Procurement

## Where do you get food?

Food can come from a variety of places. You can open an account with your school department food supplier, which allows you to use their deep discount, but keep your own accounting and invoicing. You can also purchase food from Costco, and specialty items (like soy milk) from grocery stores. Your local food pantry may be able to donate certain items that you use a lot, like applesauce cups, mac-n-cheese, cans of tuna, etc. You can also open an account with your food bank. There are a lot of options to purchase or receive free/reduced items.

## Should I accept food donations?

Yes, but we suggest that you ask for very specific things. For example, an item we use is shelf stable milk, but it is expensive and we use it each week. When corporations or groups ask if they can donate we ask them to do a milk drive. This ensures we get items that will help us cut costs and can be easily donated. Keep a list of items that people can easily donate that would be helpful to you. It's important to try to keep food consistent across all students involved in the program. If you are soliciting donations for specific items, you might want to consider what happens if you don't receive enough for all students. Will you purchase more? Or have another fundraiser?



## What do I do over long weekends and school vacations?

Over long weekends or vacations you can send extra food home with students, but be mindful of the weight of each bag. For the winter break, think about sending home grocery store gift cards to cover food costs.







# Menus

## What goes in the bags?

Each program handles what type of food they send home differently; the bags can be all shelf-stable foods or can include fresh food, which requires refrigeration and food safety handling. Some programs send the same food each week, some programs rotate the menu for more options and variety. In all cases, the bags typically contain 2 breakfasts, 2 lunches, and some healthy snacks. These are the meals that students would have access to in a typical school day.

→ Download sample menus from the Cambridge Weekend Backpack Program at [FoodForFree.org](http://FoodForFree.org)



## What about allergies or dietary restrictions?

There are many dietary restrictions to be concerned about, including nut allergies and lactose intolerance, as well as dietary restrictions for personal or religious reasons, like students who are kosher, halal, or vegetarian. It is important to collect dietary restriction information on the opt-in forms and have this tracked by school. You can avoid these allergies and restrictions by having a nut free, dairy and meat free program, or you can develop a menu and system that helps to work to get each student a bag that is right for them.

Some programs mitigate these allergies by providing meat free, high protein sandwiches for the kosher/halal/vegetarian students, replacing sunbutter for peanut butter in sandwiches, replacing milk and cheese sticks with soy milk and meat sticks, and more. It will be important to determine the level of organization that you want to take on with your own program.



# Logistics

## Who packs the bags?

To ensure that this program has a light impact on school staff, Weekend Backpack Programs usually use parent volunteers, corporate groups, and community members to pack the bags each week, either onsite or at a central location. Volunteers pack the bags onsite or deliver them on Friday morning and safely store them so that school staff can distribute them at the end of the day on Friday. Many corporations have social responsibility programs and organized days of service, and can bring their energy to your program. They have the added benefit of being future large scale donors. We suggest using an online volunteer site to organize volunteers, like VolunteerSpot or SignUp Genius to ensure you have enough volunteers each Friday.

## What kind of supplies will I need?

Big plastic tubs to store and tote food, and rolls of blue painters tape to label tubs. We use colored stickers to affix to bags that indicate if they are vegetarian, or nut free, etc., for ease of distribution. If you are assembling any of the food on your own, you will need tablecloths that can be cleaned with a sanitizer spray, disposable gloves, and ziploc bags for appropriate items.

## What kind of bags or backpacks will I need each week?

This depends on the type of program you have, and the type of food you send home. In many programs, they use plastic grocery store bags, or the black plastic bags you get at a liquor store, which can be purchased in bulk. These bags are then placed inside a child's existing backpack that go home. Other programs use reusable bags (insulated if they are sending fresh food home) that require students to bring them back each week to be refilled. Again, this just depends on each program and how they would like to organize weekly.



### **If you are holding a fundraiser here are some things to ask for:**

Mac-n-cheese cups, fruit/applesauce cups, oatmeal packets, cereal bars/granola bars, cereal cups, pretzels/chips, cup-a-soup, and shelf stable milk.







# Assessments

## How do I know it's helping?

At the end of each school year, you can send a sample survey for teachers to fill out for each child in their class who was enrolled in the program. Each child who is enrolled can be asked to advise which foods they liked and ate vs. which they didn't. This can be done by having the child circle pictures of the foods they liked and crossing out the ones they didn't. All of this data should be collected and reported out to the schools and to donors.

→ **Download a customizable sample survey at [FoodForFree.org](https://www.foodforfree.org)**

## How can you talk with other students about hunger in schools or about your Backpack Program?

It's important to find a way to engage students in your program without making students who participate in the program feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. Maintaining the anonymity of students and families that participate in the program is extremely important, but bringing attention to your program is also very beneficial. One way to talk to students about hunger in their classroom and about your program is to engage with clubs at school. You might be able to talk to students that are part of a service club or in a classroom with a teacher that is an advocate for addressing childhood hunger.

In Somerville, this connection was made with the Roots & Shoots club at the Brown Elementary School. This club is part of Jane Goodall's mission to bring youth together to address environmental, conservation, and humanitarian issues. Many of the students in the club couldn't believe that there were students in their community that didn't have enough to eat on the weekends. They decided to have a fundraiser for the Backpack Program and after lots of brainstorming, the students decided to host a table at the Somerville Winter Farmers Market to sell crafts that they made together. These students raised about \$1,000 to help students in their community.

Talking with students about hunger offers the opportunity for them to engage in a tangible way if they are interested in planning an action to address hunger. This is a really great opportunity to teach them about the difficulties that families face in their community.





## WEEKEND BACKPACK PROGRAM

# FREE Weekend Food for Your Child/Children Available!

The Name of School participates in the Weekend Backpack Program to offer a supply of nutritious meals and snacks for children over the weekend, **free of charge if you are struggling to meet your family's food needs** and would benefit from receiving additional food. The staff will discreetly distribute weekend bags on the last school day before the weekend. Any child enrolled at the Name of School is able to receive these weekly bags of food. The program will begin on Start Date. If your family is enrolled, your child/children will receive a bag of food each week until the end of the school year or until you no longer wish to participate.

If you feel that your children would benefit from receiving additional food to **meet their nutritional needs** over the weekend, we encourage you to sign them up by filling the form out below and returning it to the front office. **Enrollment is ongoing, however, the sooner your form is returned the sooner we can start sending food home.** Please send this form back to School/Program Contact by date if you are interested! Only one form is needed for all the children in your family, but include information for each child in the form below. If you have a child or children who attend other City/Town Public Schools, please include that information below. This information will be kept **confidential** between you and the staff at the Name of School. Questions or concerns? Please contact name, email, number of School/Program Contact.

### Weekend Backpack Program Consent Form

Please sign my child/children up for the Weekend Food program! I understand my child/children will soon start receiving a bag of food at the end of each week to help feed him/her over the weekend.

**PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY.**

Child's Name	Age	School and Grade (if applicable)	Special Dietary Needs (None, Kosher, Halal, Vegetarian, Nut Free, etc.)

Parent/Guardian Name \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Email Address (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently living in a shelter Y / N (Please circle)

Are you currently "doubled up" Y / N (Please circle)

**\*Please send the form in via your child's communication folder in a sealed envelope addressed to School/Program Contact\***



**FOOD FOR FREE**



## WEEKEND BACKPACK PROGRAM

# Name of Your Program Info for Families

The Name of Your Program provides a weekend supply of nutritious food for children when school lunch and breakfast is unavailable on a weekend or school holiday. Each food bag contains two breakfasts, two lunches, two snacks, one can of vegetables, one can of fruit, and additional items (milk, fruit, etc.). All food is provided to children free of charge. It is our hope that these resources will support the health, behavior, and achievement of every student who participates.

Though the program is intended to help those children whose families find it difficult to have enough food for the entire month, **all children are eligible for this program**. Information to sign up for the program will be sent home with kids in the coming weeks.

The program is run completely by wonderful volunteers who help pack the food bags. The program is funded through the generous gifts of funding sources.

**Look for more information about becoming part of Name of Program soon.** We look forward to working with staff, teachers, and you for your children!

**For more information or questions, please contact Name of Program Leader at Contact Information for Program.**





## Name of Your Program Info for Teachers

### What is the **Name of Your Program**?

The **Name of Your Program** provides a weekend supply of nutritious food for children, commonly for low income families, to replace the school meals that children miss during their weekend or extended breaks from school. Each weekend food bag contains enough food for two breakfasts, two lunches, two snacks, and one can of vegetables and one can of fruit. All food is nonperishable.

Though the program is intended to help those children whose families find it difficult to have enough food for the entire month, all children are eligible for this program. Children will be able to opt-in and opt-out of the program. We invite your help finding children who will benefit most from participating in this program!

The program is run completely by wonderful volunteers who help coordinate with your school to sign children up, pack food bags weekly, and find and organize fundraising and donation drives that keep the program running. The program is funded through the generous gifts of **funding sources**.

### How can teachers help?

As teachers, you already go out of your way daily for your students. It is our intention that **Name of Your Program** will not increase your workload or responsibilities. Please help us by:

1. Recommending any of your students who you think would benefit from having this food assistance and participating in this program;
2. Letting us know how the program is benefiting your children and ways to improve the program for your students.

We invite your feedback and collaboration with this program to make it a success. It is our hope that this program will improve the health, behavior, and achievement of your students. Thank you in advance for your help!







## Teacher Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this form for each of your students enrolled in the Weekend Backpack Program. This end-of-year survey helps us determine whether you've seen a noticeable impact of the program and find ways to improve the program.

**Student's First Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Teacher's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**School Name** \_\_\_\_\_

### Part 1: Program Impact

A. Since the beginning of the year, the frequency with which I have observed that this student:

	Has decreased	Has stayed the same	Has increased	Don't know
Tires easily, has little energy				
Has trouble concentrating				
Is absent from school				
Visits the doctor/nurse with doctor/nurse finding nothing wrong				
Has trouble sleeping				
Worries a lot				

B. Since becoming a part of the Weekend Backpack Program, has this student's:

	Gotten worse	Stayed the same	Improved
School work			
Behavior			
Health			
Attendance			

C. Do you have additional stories or anecdotes you would like to share about the program or any additional comments on the measures listed above?

So we can avoid sending home foods that go uneaten, please fill out the following section with each student if possible.

Directions:    ☐ Circle food items that are enjoyed/consumed by the student  
                       ☒ Cross out food items that are not enjoyed/consumed by the student  
                       ? Mark a “?” on food items that you do not know the child’s preference



Yogurt



String Cheese



Grilled Cheese Sandwich



Apple



Peanut Butter & Jelly Sandwich



Applesauce



Oatmeal



Bagel



Cereal



Anytimers



Fresh Sandwich



# WEEKEND BACKPACK PROGRAM

## School Name - Week 1

### Week 1 - No restrictions

Meat Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
Grilled Cheese  
Yogurt  
Oatmeal  
Cheese Stick  
Granola Bar  
Pretzels or Cheez Its  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit

### Week 1 - Vegetarian

Vegetarian Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
Grilled Cheese  
Yogurt  
Oatmeal  
Cheese Stick  
Granola Bar  
Pretzels or Cheez Its  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit

## School Name - Week 2

### Week 2 - No restrictions

Meat Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
Ham & Cheese  
Bagel & Cream Cheese  
Cheese Stick  
Cereal Cup  
Applesauce  
Pretzels  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit

### Week 2 - Vegetarian

Vegetarian Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
PB&J or Grilled Cheese  
Bagel & Cream Cheese  
Cheese Stick  
Cereal Cup  
Applesauce  
Pretzels  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit

## School Name - Week 3

### Week 3 - No restrictions

Turkey/Bacon Grilled Cheese  
Meat Sandwich & Veggies  
Oatmeal  
Yogurt  
Cheesestick  
Nutrigrain Bars  
Goldfish  
(2) Fresh Fruit  
Milk

### Week 3 - Vegetarian

Grilled Cheese  
Vegetarian Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
Oatmeal  
Yogurt  
Cheesestick  
Nutrigrain Bars  
Goldfish  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit

## School Name - Week 4

### Week 4 - No restrictions

PB&J  
Meat Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
Bagel & Cream Cheese  
Cereal Cup  
Cheese Stick  
Animal Crackers  
Fruit Cup  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit

### Week 4 - Vegetarian

PB&J  
Vegetarian Sandwich & Veggie Pack  
Bagel & Cream Cheese  
Cereal Cup  
Cheese Stick  
Animal Crackers  
Fruit Cup  
Milk  
(2) Fresh Fruit







## Let's stay in touch!

We hope that our Weekend Backpack Program Toolkit will help kickstart your Weekend Backpack Program. Please visit our website to find more resources online including a directory of current backpack programs in Massachusetts.:

<https://foodforfree.org/start-your-own-backpack-program/>

We also have a MA Weekend Backpack Program community on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/355391778316191/>

Please contact us if you have any questions regarding this Toolkit or need assistance with starting up your program.

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