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News

Hunger and Health Coalition takes Backpack Program mobile

 Elizabeth Young • March 7, 2021  2 minutes read





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Nearly 20% of Watauga County youth are classified as food insecure, and over 34% of students in Watauga utilize the National School Lunch Program to access subsidized meals in school.

The Hunger and Health Coalition, Watauga's largest and longest-running food pantry, is part of the solution. The organization places food in all ten Watauga public schools through the Backpack Program. Each school receives a supply of meal boxes for school counselors and social workers to send home with students who may not have enough to eat at home. The Backpack Program helps students get enough to eat on weekends when free and reduced price meals are not available, providing more than 5,800 take-home food boxes each year.

This year though, COVID-19 has disrupted all of the well-established processes both the Hunger and Health Coalition and the schools have had in

place in previous years. The burdens of administering remote learning, social distancing, sanitizing, and making other adjustments to the school day have taxed the school's resources, and the Backpack Program has been an unfortunate casualty of this squeeze.

"School administrators are doing all they can to adapt, keep our local kids safe, and do their jobs. We know everyone is working overtime to cover the basics," says Elizabeth Young, Executive Director of the Hunger and Health Coalition. "Sadly, that means schools don't have the time or storage space right now to keep the take-home Backpack Program boxes we usually give."

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While COVID-19 is by far the most pressing concern right now, Watauga County's long-standing hunger issues have not disappeared. To respond, the Hunger and Health Coalition, Watauga County Public Schools, and regional food bank partner Second Harvest have combined their resources to take on a massive feat: offering home delivery for the hundreds of boxes that would normally be distributed by the school.

The Hunger and Health Coalition has created a role to oversee this effort during the 2021 spring semester. Now, the organization is seeking volunteers and additional supporters to ensure food insecure students do not go without during the upcoming months.

This will go miles in helping relieve the burden schools and students are facing. "During this challenging year, this partnership will greatly assist our families that need the help," says Paul Holden, Director of Student Services for Watauga Public Schools.

If you're interested in becoming a Backpack Program delivery driver, we need your help ASAP. Contact Candace at mobiledeliveryhhc@gmail.com, or call the Hunger and Health Coalition at 828-262-1628. This new, temporary effort adds to the work the food pantry began last year to offer mobile delivery of all food assistance programs.

To sign up as a delivery driver or a Backpack Program recipient, please

contact mobiledeliveryhhc@gmail.com.

With the help of our community, we know this massive task can be accomplished, but we need your support. Become part of the solution to hunger today by getting in touch.

#Hunger and Health Coalition