**Blessings-in-a-Bag: Feeding the Hungry Children**

*Child hunger is a serious issue that requires all of us to be a part of the solution.*

There are many responses to the issue of hunger in the children of our communities in the Miami Valley. Most school districts provide these children with a free breakfast and lunch on school days. For many children, they do not have access to food after school and on the weekends. Every school district is a little different in its approach, but there is a unique response to helping these children in the Miamisburg Public Schools.

Area churches of many different denominations work together to help feed our hungry children. They have stepped up to help provide children with a bag of food to be taken home each weekend. This is the “Blessings-in-a-Bag” program for children in need in our community. These churches gather and pack food bags each week. They provide the food, deliver it to the packing church, and take turns packing bags and delivering them to the schools on Wednesday evenings or Thursday mornings. Food bags are available to children from preschool through high school to take home for the weekend.

The program began about 15 years ago when many teachers noticed that many students were coming to school on Monday mornings very hungry. Teachers, on their own, began bringing things for these children to eat after the weekends. This was discussed with the school social workers, nurses, teachers, and other staff. The children had more difficulty listening, working, and learning when they were hungry.

The school district began recruiting different churches within the district to find out if any were interested in helping start “Blessings in a Bag.” Volunteers from all denominations came together to make this program work. They prayed together, had discussions, made decisions and Blessings-in-a-Bag was born. During these meetings Sally Royer, school psychologist, came to talk to these early volunteers about what children were experiencing right in the neighborhoods around us. She talked about children who were homeless, children who slept in cars or stayed in hotel rooms, lived with multiple families, and did anything they had to do to survive. Often children did not eat again after their Friday lunch at school until Monday. It was heartbreaking to learn this was happening around us. So, working together, the churches began the process of involving their congregations in the collecting of food, delivering it to the packing sites and taking turns bagging two different months of the school year. One church each month packs the bags and delivers them to the schools. The custodians at these schools meet us and take the food bags. These are put into children’s school bags by the school social workers, counselors, and nurses on Fridays when children are at recess.

These churches and the volunteers are the real heroes….especially the church sites that receive and store food for packing, the people who purchase food that is needed and not donated, and those who oversee the process at each of the sites.

There are three groups of churches that work together to provide these food backs for children from 7 Miamisburg grade schools: Kinder, Medlar, Mound, Bauer, Bear, Mark Twain, and Jane Chance. Other schools are Miamisburg Middle School, Miamisburg High School, and Maddox Lane Preschool. Bags are provided for about 1,000 children each week.

Each church is responsible for their assigned food items being at the packing church by Wednesday evening. Each group is responsible for providing part of the food that goes in the bags. **The greatest challenge for the churches is collecting and buying needed food each week.** Each child’s bag will include 10 items: Single servings of: Vienna Sausages/ Beanie Weenies, fruit cups, fruit drinks, granola bars, foil packs of tuna or chicken, Ramen noodles, cereal, peanut butter, jelly, spaghetti and meatballs, mac and cheese, cheese/ peanut butter crackers, pudding cups, cereal, and juice.

Some of the participating area churches are St. Henry’s, Our Lady of Good Hope, Liberty, St. Jacob’s, LifePoint Community Church, St James, Parkview, Miamisburg Greenhouse, Miamisburg Wesleyan Church, and Miamisburg Assembly of God. Many school and community groups also donate to the program. Other groups that help are Bishop Leibold School, Miamisburg Rotary, Lions Club, and Masonic Temple. There have been many other contributions from local business, organizations, schools, and churches. Many children have been blessed by this community.