

NON-PROFIT SPOTLIGHT

MISSION: REMOVE FOOD INSECURITY FOR CHILDREN SO THEY GROW, LEARN, AND THRIVE

We salute Backpack Society (BPS) for its outstanding work in Douglas County. Thanks to June Everett, who founded the organization in September 2019, and her staff, the organization provides food to about 750 people every week. As the need has grown, BPS has expanded its reach and is now collaborating with 34 Douglas County schools and 12 Littleton Public Schools. The program is entirely community-supported and relies on food donations, financial donations, and grants.

Many children who experience food insecurity often feel too ashamed to seek help. However, BPS has come up with a solution. They have launched a student program that delivers food bags directly to schools, distributing them to students in need.

They offer four programs:

- **Student Weekend Bags:** 6 meals and snacks for the weekend.
- **Family Grocery Program:** for student families and school staff.
- **School Partner Program:** for school food pantry programs, school resource officers (SROs) programs, and crisis boxes.
- **Community Outreach Programs:** summer and holiday meal program.



INTERVIEW WITH FOUNDER JUNE EVERETT, AND THE BACKPACK SOCIETY STAFF

Why did you start the Backpack Society?

My corporate HR job in the restaurant industry burned me out, so I decided to give back to my community. I started a weekend pilot food program for 20 low-income students at Thunder Ridge High School. It quickly grew and became a lifeline for many more students and their families, especially after the pandemic hit. We are addressing the issue of food insecurity, which affects every child's ability to have an equal opportunity in education. It's not just about nutrition; it's also about providing mental peace to children so they don't have to worry about food when they get home. Initially, many schools didn't believe they had a food insecurity problem, but we persisted and encouraged them to share our contact information with school resource officers and the student body and offered our pantry service. Now, our service helps people get back on their feet when they face difficulties.

Food Insecurity in Douglas County

It is essential to recognize the issue of homelessness and food insecurity in Douglas County. The problem of homelessness in Douglas County is often not visible. We estimate that there are more than 200 homeless students in Douglas County. The school staff has discovered that it is not easy to identify those who require help because the students blend in, and they are often too ashamed to ask for help from the community. Some individuals stay in a hotel on some days, while on other days, they live in their cars. Resources such as the Backpack Society and other local agencies are available to provide confidential assistance. People in need do not have to travel to downtown Denver for help.

What does BPS provide?

BPS offers weekly family food boxes and weekend student bags containing essential food items such as peanut butter, mac and cheese, fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat products. Instead of providing a standard food box, we customize the boxes to accommodate food allergies and preferences. We understand that some people who receive these boxes can't eat everything in them. So, we want to ensure that no food goes to waste, and we want our families to feel good about what they receive.

We partner with Mountain Vista High School, which operates a hydroponic farm that grows various types of vegetables and herbs, including lettuce, kale, and radishes. As part of the program, students are taught entrepreneurial skills, such as marketing, pricing, and sales techniques. They run a farm club after school to sell their produce. At the end of each week, a student brings any leftover produce from the farm to BPS, which is given directly to families. The farm produce is fresh and non-GMO, using all organic practices with no chemicals or pesticides. People also donate extra vegetables from their gardens, especially during the summer. It's a win for everyone!



“I often think about how food insecurity affects a child's ability to concentrate and impacts other children in the classroom. This ripple effect can disrupt the entire class. Often, something as simple as a granola bar can make a difference. It's not just about nutrition; it's also about providing mental peace to children so they don't have to worry about food when they get home. “ June Everett, Founder

How do you find the organizations to support you?

Food partnerships have played a significant role in our work because 70% of our food is donated. We believe in building connections with other non-profits to support each other. Our partnership journey began when I attended a Colorado state meeting on food insecurity and discovered an organization called 'We Don't Waste.' They are a non-profit in Denver that rescues food from going to landfills and saves all kinds of food, including produce, milk, and candy bars. They distribute the food to organizations like ours to help the community.

We partner with King Soopers for produce, meat, and eggs, and they even send staff to help and deliver food to our office. We also work with Flowers Baking Co. and Frito-Lay. Our new program, Impact Partners, allows small businesses to donate a percentage or dollar amount per job, inspired by local business owner Colton of LoCol Paint, who faced food insecurity as a child.

We have formed close partnerships with local sports teams, businesses, and schools that conduct food donation drives. Our 'Cereal Drive' contest, sponsored by students in local elementary schools, has helped us stock up for about six months. As we grow, we learn to be more purposeful with our food drives and more intentional about the food that comes in and goes out to our clients.



Future Plans?

BPS has grown rapidly over the past three years, and we plan to stabilize the organization while continuing to help people in need. Our first step towards this goal is to open an on-site food market this spring, where people can schedule shopping appointments instead of being given food boxes. Additionally, we plan to expand to a new school district only after ensuring we can continue supporting the current schools we serve. Currently, we serve schools in Douglas County and Littleton and are seeking to expand into the Englewood School District due to its high level of need. We are in talks with Englewood Middle School and are considering rolling out a pilot program to serve as our first Title One school in the district.



How can we help BPS?

Please help us spread the word about our organization and our work. We are always in need of donations and volunteers to support our mission. Our youngest volunteer was a 5-year-old who generously donated his birthday money to BPS and volunteered to pack bags. A year later, he even brought his friends to volunteer and teach them how to pack bags. It's heartwarming to see how proud he is of his contribution. We also encourage teenagers to volunteer, as kids helping kids can make a significant impact.

BPS has recently launched a new high school volunteer program. Douglas County Schools requires students to complete at least 20 volunteer hours to graduate. Our program allows students to volunteer for BPS independently by conducting digital or door-to-door food drives. They can drop off the food at our office or help sort through the donations for expiration and put them away, which earns them extra volunteer hours. This program engages high school students and raises awareness about BPS, food insecurity, and the importance of community involvement. We hope their experience with us will inspire them to help others in need and positively impact their community.

