

# The FACES of Hunger: How Weekend Backpack Programs Can Better Support the Children They Serve

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America is, in the global imagination, a first-world country which boasts great wealth and opportunity for everyone. Yet the unfortunate reality is that as many as 13 million US children live in poverty, or nearly 20% of all American children (No Kid Hungry). Growing up in a rural Virginian town, I witnessed firsthand how poverty and food insecurity can ravage the children of a community—but I also witnessed the efforts of kind individuals to bridge the gap. My hometown’s food bank has implemented multiple programs and resources aimed at helping the food insecure, including a weekend backpack program created to support children who don’t have full meals to come home to. Heartwarming as small-town altruism may be, however, it is not the end-all-be-all of poverty resolution. Rather, it is a mere bandaid on the gaping wound of hungry mouths, and worse, some of the programs offered can have negative psychological consequences that negate the good they accomplish. Backpack programs such as the one my hometown offers are not as effective as one would hope; simply sending children home with a few handfuls of extra food cannot solve such a pervasive problem. Individuals must take local support to the next level and advocate for significant legislative change if we are ever going to have a country where no child goes hungry.

The USDA defines food security as a range from High (no reported hunger or reduced diet) to Very Low (multiple reports of hunger and disrupted eating patterns). Using this range, they found that 14.8% of all American households with children reported food insecurity at some point during 2020. This number is shocking, but it shouldn’t be; the issue of poverty and resulting lack of food has only been exacerbated in the last couple decades by the advent of the internet and the rise of consumerism. Prices have risen and the amount of advertising forced upon citizens has increased, creating a culture of spending that leaves those less fortunate grasping for scraps under the table. Another unfortunately shocking truth is the geographical congregation of such households. An article by sociologists Joy Piontak and Michael Schulman explores the connection between rural poverty and food access, arguing that the general American public has been swayed by media narratives to believe that most issues with poverty and starvation lie in big cities. Conversely, small town populations are often seen as wholesome, tightly-bonded communities, where love triumphs over suffering. To see this contrast, one only has to compare an episode of *Duck Dynasty* to one of *Law and Order*. The demonstrable truth, however, is the exact opposite of the picture these narratives paint: “Regionally, households in the South have the highest rates of food insecurity, and this region includes a large number of rural areas. . .the reality of widespread poverty and hunger in rural areas has largely been left out of the conversation” (Piontak and Schulman). Such a clear disparity suggests an underlying pattern of spatial inequality in our economy, where the poorer communities are those doing blue-collar work far away from the support and resources larger cities can offer.

Bringing the reality of food insecurity to the forefront of public thought is only part of the equation. To fully erase the hunger epidemic, it is important to identify the root causes of the issue and address them directly. Poverty is inextricably tied to food insecurity, but to say that it is the sole *cause* of the issue is an oversimplified take on a very complex situation. Those living beneath the poverty line experience a myriad of overlapping difficulties, and there are many societal factors at play that have heavy influence on whether an individual is food insecure. One difficulty lies in the ability to physically obtain food; lack of transportation and distance from larger grocery stores forces many people to rely upon sparingly stocked, junk food-centric convenience stores for their daily diet. Another complication is the presence of cultural or language barriers—accessing needed resources may be difficult for those who don't speak English or are unfamiliar with American social systems, particularly if no translations are provided (Healthy Food Playbook). For children specifically, studies have found that the state of their caregivers' health plays a major part in their level of food security: “mothers in food-secure poor households are in better physical and mental health and are less likely to report intimate-partner violence and substance use compared with mothers in food-insecure poor households” (Gunderson and Ziliak). All these aspects and more combine to create an individual's food insecurity risk, so any program attempting to create an overarching solution to the problem of hunger must account for each of them.

Although I have never experienced food insecurity myself, my connection to the issue is deeply personal. I grew up in a small Southern Virginia town which has a population of around 7,000 and a poverty rate of nearly 30%. The public high school which I attended was crowded with children who relied entirely on school lunches to get their nutrients, most of whom were non-white, none of whom were uniquely struggling. The blight of food insecurity has been festering beneath the surface of Farmville's sweet country exterior for decades. Ever the tight-knit small town stereotype, however, the people of our little farm town first came together nearly 30 years ago to give support to the needy in their community. FACES, or Farmville Area Community Emergency Services, provides emergency and supplementary food to residents living under the poverty line in the Farmville and Keysville areas. Since a haphazard group of citizens dedicated their free time in 1981 to assist with food insecurity in their county, the organization “has evolved into one of the largest and most efficient food agencies in Virginia. FACES now distributes food to an average of 900 households annually representing over 1,800 individuals. . .” (FACES). One way they accomplish this goal is a weekend backpack program, which, according to their official website “provides weekend meals for school children and supports a high school food pantry.” This event has recurred every weekend for many years, and is run entirely through volunteer effort. Said volunteers pack the bags Thursday afternoons and drop them off at the Prince Edward County Public Schools Friday mornings, to be distributed to eligible children before they go home for the weekend. Although FACES as a whole has other programs intended to support food insecure children, the backpack program is both the one they are most well-known for, as well as the one I have the most personal experience with; therefore, it is the one upon which I intend to focus my evaluation.

Before I offer a more detailed map of what this organization is and how it functions, as well as what it attempts to resolve, I'd like to offer a ruler to place their performance against. A good weekend backpack program should, in alignment with its core goal, feed the child it serves well. It should offer healthy, hearty food that is properly packaged, as well as provide enough food to fully cover the child's nutritional needs over the time period allotted. It should also, although

the mission statements of these types of programs do not often specifically outline this standard, improve the child's life. Two veteran scholars in the nutrition and food security field, Maryah Fram and Edward Frongillo, conducted a review of the potential benefits and harms posed by backpack programs. Their research concluded that these programs frequently lack an actual framework of support, leading to an exacerbation rather than alleviation of children's food-related worries; it also noted that "giving food to children shifts some of the responsibility for managing the stressors of poverty literally onto their shoulders" (Fram and Frongillo). From this research, I propose that a good solution to child hunger does not leave the children feeling ashamed of their need. Rather, it addresses any negative psychological consequences such as chronic stress or shame, and offers community to the children rather than isolation. Lastly, the program should seek to confront the underlying causes of child food insecurity that I discussed in previous paragraphs—with the caveat that this is a tenant of the solution that can be better accomplished by those with an abundance of money and resources.

To properly evaluate FACES' adherence to these criteria, I interviewed Joanna Baker, the co-president of FACES. Baker serves alongside her husband Paul Baker, is a retired professor from the local university, and has been a member of the Farmville community for a good portion of her life. Supporting my decision to use an interview with Ms. Baker as a research tactic is a critical review of interviewing as a data collection method by Hamza Alshenqeeti, a Saudi Arabian researcher who specializes in linguistics and mixed-method research. The review argued for one of the greatest benefits of interview as a research methodology: compared to more impersonal methods, "more appropriate answers and, subsequently, more accurate data will be reached." Alshenqeeti's conclusion led me to believe that, although an interview should not be the only source I rely upon when evaluating FACES' performance, it would allow me insight into the lived experience of volunteers that I could not gain with a more distanced approach.

Keeping this goal in mind, I began the interview with the establishment of a baseline: where does FACES get its funding and food, what types of food do they give out, and how often do they get donations, either financial or physical? Baker informed me that FACES gets very little monetary support from the federal government, instead relying upon local donations and grants. As far as food goes, they purchase primarily from a regional food bank called FeedMore, and supplement with food donated from local grocery stores. The food divided out into backpacks is most often fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, meat, and dairy, although the weekly offerings differ as they rely upon what FACES could procure at any given time (Baker). The interview then turned to the backpack program specifically; its origins as well as Baker's own perception of its success. She did not have an exact year of creation but imparted that the program emerged not from FACES' own initiative, but when a need was identified by elementary school personnel. Shockingly, Baker even revealed that she felt she could not properly evaluate the program because no personal connection exists between FACES and the clients it serves at *all*: "We do not know the children that we serve. The school counselors identify the students, maintain the lists, and distribute the food. Our role is simply to supply food." Such separation between those in need and those who serve seems to be in direct violation of the criteria outlined above which demand that the program offer community to the children as well as address any underlying issues present in their lives.

The final section of the interview focused on FACES' response to the COVID-19 pandemic—how they responded to contagion risks, and if this affected the organization's ability to achieve its mission in any way. Baker informed me that the organization switched to a drive-through system for food transfer, as well as enhancing their sanitation initiatives and conducting vaccine clinics for all clients and volunteers. These changes were well-received by the community, and as of November 2021, FACES has yet to return to their previous mode of operations. Baker did acknowledge a drawback to the abundance of caution necessary in the midst of a pandemic: "The unfortunate side of this is that we do not have the same contact with clients that we once did. . .it's possible that there could be needs that are going unnoticed." A system that already interacted very little with those it served has become markedly more impersonal; FACES has become quite faceless.

FACES does not, in fact, pass the litmus test of a successful backpack program—but not from lack of trying. The organization exceeds the threshold of my first criteria; FACES offers copious amounts of fresh, healthy food. It accomplishes its overt mission, yet like many weekend backpack programs led by local non-profits, falls short on the second and third by a large margin. Food is *all* FACES offers, and as prior research has shown, an anonymous organization sending children home with satchels of celery does very little to address the actual root causes of food insecurity. The organization is not even beginning to address issues of spatial inequality, cultural barriers, or the child's individual home life, and the children have no venue through which to ask for help if they need it. So the question has now become: how can FACES, a non-profit with far less volunteers than it has hungry mouths to feed, ever hope to surpass its limits and make a real difference? To the volunteers of Farmville and other small towns like it, understand that although you are few, with little funding and hundreds of hungry mouths to feed, the standards I have outlined here are absolutely applicable to a small-town situation. To round out the interview, Joanna Baker offered some advice on how individual do-gooders can begin to carve real change into such a massive issue. Her suggestions included advocating for full funding for public schools, "adopting" a classroom and providing healthy snacks for kids, holding a targeted food drive for local banks to gather specifically requested food, and actively volunteering at local food banks (Baker). Some of these suggestions pull the weight of support away from non-governmental organizations like FACES, and redirect it to public schools, or communal spaces where children can receive more personal support. The others focus on getting boots on the ground, so to speak; the more people donating to or volunteering at an individual food bank, the less that food bank must pour its resources into accomplishing its simplest goals. This addition of manpower allows those leading the organization to begin supporting its community in other, more comprehensive ways.

Still, these solutions are not encompassing enough; food insecurity is a national problem with pervasive sociological causes, so the brunt of its solution should not be placed upon local populations. Those government officials who sit high in the capitol, far removed from the suffering of poverty-stricken rural communities, have the power to set down roots of real change. One research report on the topic, conducted by multiple doctors and scholars with experience in researching the effects of food security on child development, argues that privatized food assistance programs should be only a safety net rather than a dependence. To accomplish this shift, the researchers suggest legislative changes around budgetary restrictions and how the poverty line is defined, which will result in increased participation rates in public food assistance programs,

ensuring that families are receiving sufficient benefits from a variety of sources. They also point out that greater documentation of the role that non-governmental programs play in reducing food insecurity will help the federal government make decisions as to the types and amount of support necessary (Fiese, et al.), something that I believe participating in would benefit FACES greatly. This is not, however, the only way that individuals involved in local operations can affect the national situation. I asked Joanna Baker how she would recommend an individual take steps to build upon local programs and advocacy to get closer to these national policy changes. Her response was as simple as it comes: know who your Congressional representatives are, and reach out to them with your thoughts on pending legislation. Anyone can take a couple minutes to follow and respond to their representative on social media (or email them directly if a concern is particularly pressing), but if enough average citizens do so, it has been proved in the past that national policy bends to their will.

Although I believe that FACES could be doing a much better job of caring for its community's children, I also understand that the creature is not greater than the creator. The food bank is staffed by (mostly retired) members of the Farmville community who have dedicated their free time to helping those around them, a characteristic it shares with most local non-profit organizations. A final thought Joanna Baker shared with me sums up the situation well: "The best thing that could happen to FACES is to be put out of business because there is no longer a need in our community. Until then, we serve as we are able." Private, localized operations will always be limited by capacity; the ultimate goal is not to create one program which will solve child hunger on its own, but to create a functional network of support. Until such a thing can happen, those with kind hearts will serve in the ways they are able.

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