

PROFILE:  
**Dickinson  
BackPack  
Program**



**Begun**  
**January 2014**

**Served**  
**up to 240**  
**students**  
**every Friday**

**Volunteers**  
**75**

**Raised**  
**in 2014**  
**\$18,570**

**Raised**  
**in 2015**  
**\$19,501**

“What would you do with \$100?”

It was the perfect writing assignment for a first grade class, right out of the classic holiday movie “Christmas Story.”

While Ralphie’s Red Ryder B.B. gun wasn’t a hot item, all the kids began scribbling out lists of other toys they wanted. Except one, a little boy who, for classroom art projects, often drew pictures of food.

With \$100, he wrote, he would buy groceries for his family.

It was an eye-opener for his teacher, who had no idea that hunger infiltrated her classroom. Not in modern-day Dickinson, N.D., one of the fastest growing cities in the nation and the largest on the southern fringe of the Bakken oil boom. Not in a community with an enviable 1.5% unemployment rate and median household income over \$60,000.

“It’s hard to explain to an outsider,” says Kristin Seaks, a social worker for Dickinson Public Schools. “People are becoming rich from the oil, but that doesn’t always trickle down into better ways of life for those struggling to get by every day.”

Seaks is director of the Dickinson BackPack Program, which filled the backpacks of up to 200 underprivileged students every Friday last winter and spring with supplemental groceries for the weekend and school breaks.

Each BackPack offered enough child-friendly, nutritious, nonperishable food that children can easily assemble into six healthy meals.

The food—including a combination of shelf-stable milk, cereals, soups, mac and cheese, granola bars, canned chicken, tuna, fruits and vegetables—cost about \$5 per backpack. It’s a small price to pay to ensure that most of the students return to school Monday mornings with a different craving: a hunger to learn.

Modeled on and part of the national Feeding America BackPack Program, the Dickinson initiative began in January 2014 and has since raised more than \$54,000 in donations from local individuals, businesses and organizations. More than \$38,000 of that came from Dakota Medical Foundation’s Giving Hearts Day.

“We started talking about it at the beginning of last school year after discovering, while talking to each other, that some students didn’t have any, or very little food, on week-ends,” Seaks said. “One of the those discussions involved that little boy who drew pictures of food.”

Even though Dickinson program was a last-minute participant in 2014 Giving Hearts Day, she said, it definitely helped raise additional money to sustain the program. "It also gave us a good base of donors and hopefully we'll be even more successful this year, because the demand for backpacks is growing."

Before the program kicked off, a group of concerned citizens raised \$10,000 from the community and partnered with St. John Lutheran Church, which offered its basement for packing and storing the food. The church also agreed to oversee finances and provide 501c3 tax-exempt nonprofit status. It was enough to order the first shipment of food from the Great Plains Food Bank in Fargo, which delivers packed, tied grocery bags filled with donated food. (The GPFB provides food for 85 schools in 31 North Dakota communities with Backpack programs.)

More than 75 volunteers are involved in the Dickinson program, Seaks said, from unpacking trucks to picking up donated extra food items from the local Wal-Mart, Family Fare and Amen Food Pantry stores, which also partner with the program. And on Thursdays at St. John Lutheran, volunteers add fresh fruit and other donated items to the packages.

Early Friday mornings, volunteer school employees discreetly place the grocery bags inside backpacks stored in each of the student's school lockers. (Any student who doesn't own a backpack is given one.)

The program nearly doubled by the end of the school year in May, from 106 to about 200 students within five months. Funding was enough to continue providing weekly food packages over the entire summer.

The only rule: To participate, children must have a signed permission form from their parents, Seaks said. "Some of the schools in our district send the forms home to all students, and some prefer to send the form home to students who receive free and reduced meals."

Dickinson, with more than 3,400 students enrolled in its school district, has encountered challenges with the advent of the western North Dakota oil boom, specifically in higher rent, food and childcare costs for parents. Added to the usual cultural culprits that burden working class families, it's no wonder hunger is growing.

Recently Seaks received a phone call from a parent who said her children would no longer be participating in the Dickinson Backpack program. "The family thanked me for our help," she said, "and explained that their economic circumstances had improved to the point where they now wanted to make their own donations to the program."

That's a Pay It Forward moment that won't fit into anyone's backpack.

**Dickinson**  
**BackPack Program**  
146 6th Ave W  
Dickinson  
(701) 225-6747  
[kseaks@dpsnd.org](mailto:kseaks@dpsnd.org)