

# THE IMPACT OF A BACKPACK

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Cambria County Backpack Project

# mission

“To work collaboratively to leverage resources in our communities to alleviate childhood hunger, while closing the gap between chronic hunger and academic achievement.”



Abby Romig, 2020-21 CCBP Intern  
Caitlyn Miller, 2020-21 CCBP Intern



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2019-20 & 2020-21 CCBP Coordinator



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# OUR STORY

In 2013, a handful of nonprofit organizations formed the Johnstown Backpack Project Collaborative with the mission of working together to alleviate childhood hunger. The group shared similar stories of children hoarding snacks, hiding food beneath furniture at home to ensure they had something to eat for later, or telling staff how they concocted meals from whatever they could find in their cupboards. So moved by the situation and determined to do something about it, Lee Initiatives provided the startup funds for the group to launch the weekend feeding program.

Initially distributed to children referred through after school programs, the Project began in spring of 2013 with 120 children, the vast majority enrolled in the Greater Johnstown School District. In the years that followed, neighboring school districts demonstrated that chronic childhood hunger knows no boundaries. Each year brought expansion to a new school community. In 2017, having provided weekend meals to 360 children from four school districts and two preschools across Cambria County, the Project changed its name to reflect its expanded service area. In the four years since, the Cambria County Backpack Project (CCBP) provided 273,450 meals to children from eight school districts and two preschool programs county-wide.

Since its inception, the Project's food pantry, packing and food distribution areas have been housed at The Learning Lamp. Traditionally, an AmeriCorps member hosted by the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies manages day to day operations with guidance from a committee of representatives from referring schools and agencies. Although having a new AmeriCorps member serve as Project coordinator each year has enabled the CCBP to operate with minimal overhead, the Project's long-term sustainability and future expansion require leadership from a permanent director. To that end, the CCBP will advance its mission with a full-time administrator in the 2021-22 program year. The change coincides with new, healthier food items, nutrition education, increased access to healthier foods, and an emphasis on connecting parents to services and resources that enable them to better meet the needs of their families.

# 2020-21 RECAP

The [2020-21](#) school year came with challenges as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Instruction fluctuated between in-person, hybrid, and virtual learning platforms for all of our partner schools. Students were in school one day and out the next, as upticks in positive COVID-19 cases and corresponding periods of quarantine ultimately dictated when, where, and how learning would take place.

For the Cambria County Backpack Project, the pandemic disrupted how children experiencing chronic hunger were referred to the weekend meal program. Typically, teachers, school nurses, food service workers, and guidance counselors refer children based on in-person observations—taking note of students' complaints about being hungry and how they would behave on Monday mornings, as well as watching if children routinely ask for seconds or put extra food from breakfast or lunch in their bags to take home. Reduced and inconsistent interactions with students during the bulk of [2020-21](#) made it difficult for partner schools and agencies to identify and serve children in need. In an effort to prevent hungry children from falling through the cracks, most participants who received bags of food the previous year continued to receive weekend meals in [2020-21](#) unless parents indicated the help was no longer needed. That said, some families that opted for all-virtual learning for children were hard to track down, as many temporarily relocated from the area.

Even as referrals and food distribution lagged behind that of years past, the [2020-21](#) program year brought expansion into two new school districts as Cambria Heights and Windber Area joined the Project. The timing was also right to review the nutritional value of the food we provide. With the help of two public health interns from Saint Francis University and a dietitian in training from Cedar Crest College, the CCBP tackled long-discussed improvements to our menu, compiled a three-year rotation of nutrition education information, recipes, shopping trips, and more that will be included in participants' bags, created a user-friendly, resource-filled website, and conducted a health and wellness survey of participants' families to help guide the Project in better serving families in the year ahead. Other improvements included stepped up communications through monthly newsletters and videos and increased opportunities for volunteers.

The CCBP was also successful in securing funding from the [1889 Foundation](#) to support the creation of a permanent Project administrator who will oversee the rotating coordinator position and focus on long-term sustainability. The new CCBP Director will focus on strategic planning, fundraising, and sponsorships as well as expansion of the Project in undeserved communities across Cambria County in the years to come.

# VOLUNTEERS

The CCBP depends on the tireless work of volunteers to sort donations, clean bins, pack bags, and sponsor fundraisers that help us do what we do. Together, with the generosity of individuals, businesses, community groups, and foundations, the CCBP will continue to reduce childhood hunger and ensure children come to school on Monday mornings fed and ready to learn.



421  
[ VOLUNTEER HOURS ]

355  
[ VOLUNTEERS ]

# NEARLY 300 KIDS FED THROUGH

BAGS DISTRIBUTED  
7,992

MEALS DISTRIBUTED  
47,952

KIDS FED  
283



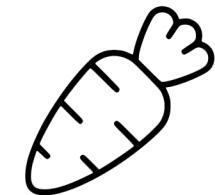
# 10 PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

CCBP partners refer kids on a yearly basis so staff members can re-evaluate symptoms and make sure kids with the greatest needs are being served. Participants are referred based on a list of chronic hunger symptoms, which help to identify those who are struggling.

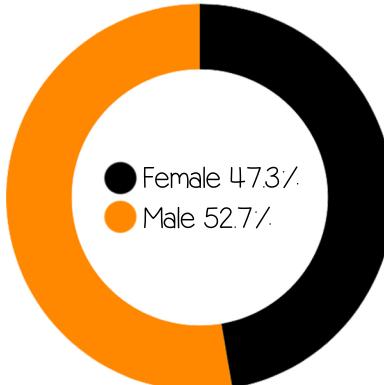


Referral partners include Blacklick Valley, Cambria Heights, Ferndale Area, Forest Hills, Greater Johnstown, Mom's House, Morrellville Pre-K, Richland, Westmont Hilltop, and Windber Area.

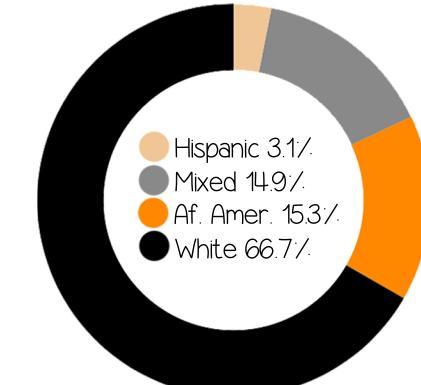
# OUR PARTICIPANTS



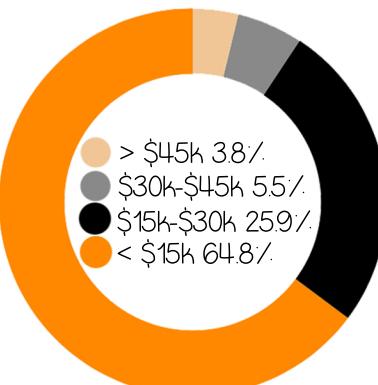
Gender



Race



income



# WAYS TO GIVE

Your generosity helps Cambria County children in need. Choose a way to give that works for you and know that you are helping to make a difference in the lives of children.

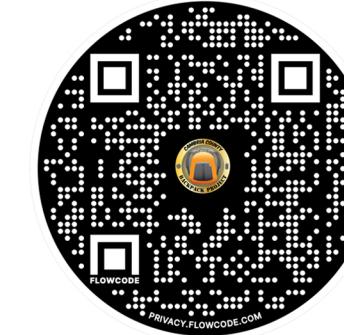
~ Donate Money

- \* Every \$5 provides 6 nutritious meals to chronically hungry children in Cambria County.
- \* Checks made payable to “Cambria County Backpack Project” can be sent to 2025 Bedford St. Johnstown, PA 15904.

~ Donate Food

- \* Hosting a foodraiser is a great way to reduce the cost of food the CCBP orders from the food bank.

scan to donate money



scan to donate food



# GROWTH FOR

“Starting in the 2021-22 school year, there will be a 40% increase of foods placed into the bags and a 20% increase to meet the daily recommended intakes for children ages 5-18. In the new and improved bags, we added 1 shelf stable yogurt, 1 fresh apple, 1 slim jim, 1 cup of vegetables, and 1 pack of veggie goldfish. Our goal with increasing more food is to make sure children are reaching the amount of daily calories needed to be nourished and energized in school.

Along with the newly modified menu, we developed a website that outlines everything about the Cambria County Backpack Project and includes our mission statement, how to volunteer, how to donate, and the ‘news-trition’ page that outlines the basic fundamentals of healthy eating and daily recommended intakes. With the website being readily available to the public, we hope the communities served by the CCBP will have a better understanding of the Cambria County Backpack Project, what we do, and why this project is so important to so many children.”

~ Caitlin Miller, 2020-21 CCBP Intern

# 2021-22



Abby Gerlach  
2020-21 CCBP Intern  
2021-22 CCBP Coordinator



Kristen Villarrial  
2021-22 CCBP Director

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<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxZzDnEoRfsk28iltVRKqPw>



<https://ccbackpackproject.wixsite.com/cambriacounty>

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Cambria County  
Redevelopment Authority

Thank you to all volunteers  
and donors for another  
successful year!



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Lighting the way to a brighter future.  
**the Learning Lamp**™