

Pantries fill need for youth's access to food outside of school

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension created a self-serve emergency food distribution site called Little Free Pantries to serve over 500 youth a month to combat youth food insecurity in Lemhi County.

The Situation

According to the last census, 15% of Lemhi County youth live in food-insecure households. In our public elementary school, 52% of Salmon students last year qualified for free or reduced lunches, and 29% of Salmon's junior and senior high school students qualified. A total of nearly 20% of Lemhi County youth live in homes that are using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. In most recent data, 183 women participated in the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) nutrition program with their children in Lemhi County.

Our Response

When community members came to the University of Idaho Extension office in Lemhi County to address food insecurity, a food summit was held. As a result, the Salmon Community Dinner Table was formed. Guided by Extension Educator Katie McFarland, the group worked with a local contractor and an Eagle Scout to construct Little Free Pantries to combat youth food insecurity in the community. The Little Free Pantries are self-serve emergency food distribution sites specifically for youth. Many youths are challenged to find a consistent food supply when they are out of school and can't use the breakfast and lunch programs.



Youth paint one of the Little Free Pantries built to serve community youth. Photo By Katie McFarland.

The pantries offer an alternative to youth who may not have enough food at home. They are especially critical during extended weekends, school holiday breaks and summer breaks.

There are four pantries in Salmon. Pantries are filled by local volunteers and donations are coordinated by the University of Idaho Extension office in Lemhi County.

Program Outcomes

Since the pantries operate on a volunteer basis it is extremely difficult to measure the amount of food going in and out of the boxes on a weekly basis. To retain user privacy, Extension Educator Katie McFarland installed counters on each pantry. The counters record

how many times the doors are opened, and the counters are checked on a bimonthly basis. Results have shown more use than anticipated. In the months of April and May, after installation, the pantries were used 1,213 times. Over the summer in June, July and August, the pantries were used 1,165 times. On average during the school year, each pantry is visited five times a day. In the summer, pantries were visited an average of three times a day. One local volunteer has headed up the oversight of the pantries and checks each weekly, filling as needed.

The project strengthened community collaboration around youth hunger by engaging volunteers, local businesses, churches and youth organizations in a shared effort to support children and families. The pantries provide youth with immediate, stigma-free access to food, helping reduce stress associated with food insecurity and supporting student wellbeing during times when school meals are unavailable. By supplementing household food supplies, the pantries help

families stretch limited resources during periods of economic stress.

The Future

Community sponsorships and volunteer-led maintenance have created a sustainable model for ongoing support, ensuring continued access to emergency food resources for local youth. Several pantries have been sponsored by individuals and groups and are filled on a regular basis. The program goal is that if still needed, the pantries will have a weekly sponsor to keep all four pantries filled continuously. The success of the original pantries inspired additional organizations and churches to independently install and maintain new pantry sites, expanding the countywide emergency food network.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

- Salmon Community Dinner Table

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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