



Sandra Sanchez: Serving up food with a side dish of hope

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In a warehouse at 19th Street and LaSalle Avenue, a group of volunteers who care about Waco children's health every week carefully pack 400 bags full of nutritious foods to send home with low-income area students on Friday afternoons.

The backpacks — filled with juices, canned soups, granola bars, pudding, fresh fruits and cereals — will hopefully keep the children fed through the weekends, said Jane Bounds, president of the newly formed nonprofit group McLennan County Pack of Hope.

"This way, they can have a full meal over the weekend," Bounds told me as volunteers hastily stuffed backpacks in assembly-line style at the Sodexo Food Service warehouse. "Some kids don't eat a nutritious meal until Monday."

Pack of Hope began passing out food kits Sept. 9 to about 200 students in McLennan County. They now deliver to nine area school districts and feed nearly 400 students, including 165 in Waco ISD, 29 in LaVega ISD, 20 in Midway ISD and seven in Robinson ISD.

School counselors discreetly deliver the unmarked food packs to students on Fridays. Some children reportedly get teary-eyed as they receive what for many will be the only morsels they'll eat all weekend.

In this age when so many seem to have so much, it's sad to think many children in our area do not get enough to eat. But the reality is that breakfasts and lunches that many children receive in school may be their only meals. During holidays and weekends, many often go hungry.

"Schools are seeing kids come in Monday morning and just gorging themselves, eating too much, too fast," said Matt Hess, education director for World Hunger Relief and co-organizer of the Food Planning Task Force of McLennan County. "It's hard to know how many kids are not getting the amount of food they need."

About 65 percent of students in McLennan County qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and more than 26,000 students received free or reduced-price meals in the 2009-10 academic year, the task force reports.

Come summer, these children are eligible for free breakfasts and lunches from the U.S. Department of Agriculture offered at several area schools and churches. Unfortunately, many of these children appear to fall through the cracks on weekends and holidays during the school year and end up going hungry.

Some eat from dumpsters on weekends, Bounds says, or supplement with low-quality, cheap food that is high in fat and lacks nutrition. Hess says that will only contribute to future health care issues in our area as these children are at risk of developing diabetes and high blood pressure.

Certainly, our community can do better to see that the littlest among us are fed.

To be fair, several area groups and churches have sponsored backpack food programs over the years. The Junior League of

Waco, for example, sends weekend food packs to 24 children at Talitha Koum and 25 at Dean Highland Elementary.

But if all of these groups would coordinate through one organization, like Pack of Hope, they could feed hundreds more children for less money. That's because bulk food could be purchased through the Capital Area Food Bank of Texas at just 10 cents per pound. A Sunday school class, for instance, that donates a carton of fruit cups could give double that amount if money were given to purchase it through the Food Bank, Bounds says.

Pack of Hope has received about \$10,000 in donations and grants from area businesses and citizens. But we can all help to do much more. It currently spends \$4.77 per child per food backpack — about \$200 to feed a child during weekends per year.

Understandably, some prefer to buy items to donate. That fills their hearts and shouldn't be discouraged. I suggest they give to a food drive going on through Dec. 16 at Waco-area Starbucks to benefit Pack of Hope. Needed items include: individual cereals; tuna packs; microwavable macaroni and cheese packs; soups; cheese and crackers; peanut butter packs; and fruit.

During this holiday season when so many of us indulge, the mere thought that some children must scrounge through trash bins on weekends seeking food turns my stomach. And it should yours.

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