**CHILD HUNGER SUMMIT 2017**

**BackPack Programs**

Sally Warden, Asbury United Methodist Church

Fran Fluhler, Manna House

Jacqueline Dennis, Grady Madison African Methodist Episcopal Church

Melissa Betts, Cullman First United Methodist Church

**Facilitator**: Panel, please tell us a little about your backpack programs.

Melissa: In 2010 our church got a new pastor where I was the secretary and he encouraged us to say “yes”. We contacted local schools to tell them if they see a child in need to let us know. Then in 2011, tornadoes ravaged Cullman and the schools contacted us to let us know they had food insecure kids.

Jacqueline: I am a member of a small congregation in Madison and I took over the backpack program at my church and reorganized it. I got our Women’s Missionary Society involved and got more support from our church and community. We have received community awards and grants from community foundations for our program. We have five to ten active volunteers in the program at our church and an important tip is to find those who have a passion for it. I have split up the tasks between shopping, packing and delivery. Kids in church help pack them and teens in need of service hours help, too. We serve 72 kids at Rainbow Elementary. We solicit funds from local foundations and other non-profits and have partnered with another church so we now pack the backpacks every other week so it fits in our schedule better.

Fran: Our program started because of a sad event in Huntsville where three kids from Ridgecrest school starved to death. Steve Bannon with the city of Huntsville read about a backpack program in Houston and shared this information with me. I have learned there are givers, doers and messengers and Steve was the messenger. We started serving 25 kids at Ridgecrest School and now serve 425 kids. It was the first backpack program in Alabama. Ed Raines at FBNA worked with us to get us the products we needed. FBNA made an exception to let churches that are not partner agencies get food from there. Our program has expanded to other schools.

Sally: I was on a committee reviewing grant requests and one was for a backpack program. I wondered why my church was not doing a backpack program in our community. We started a pilot backpack program working with two other churches. Madison City School system wanted to get all their schools on a backpack program and called a meeting with all the local churches in the area. I see my role as a mentor and cheerleader for the backpack program working in an on-call capacity with the local schools. To be sustainable you must learn and focus on the volunteer aspect.

**Audience Question:** How do we get the local schools to identify those kids in need of it?

Panel response: Must rely on teachers and we have retired teachers that volunteer with our program which strengthens our relationship there. Let the schools know you can add students to program anytime. At our school if they receive free and reduced lunches, they must opt-in to be on the backpack program. We work with school counselors to identify at risk students. We also have a meeting with the school’s central office before school starts and when it’s over to make plans and identify best practices. Facilitator noted that FBNA has forms they can provide on this topic to help.

**Audience:** In my part of Limestone County we see where parents are failing to complete forms so their kids can participate in the federal school lunch program and get on the backpack program so we only have 17 out of 86 students that are in the program. Teachers are seeing kids that are hungry on Mondays, they come to school without supplies and they take extra food out of lunchroom in their clothes to take home. Our backpack program has been in existence for 18 months. We don’t know why parents are not signing up for it.

Panel Response: Some parents may be afraid of being reported. We let parents know in our backpack opt-in letter that their involvement will not be shared outside of the school. School social workers can help draft this letter. We also attend PTA meetings and give out food and flyers to accomplish our goal to not let any child go hungry. Also, include in letter where the food comes from.

**Audience:** We are interested in starting a pilot backpack program and we are worried about its sustainability.

Panel Response: Before you begin look at your finances to see how many children you can support on your backpack program. Let school counselors know if a partner is needed. It is very important to pre-plan and know how much money you have available for it. In my county, there are over 4,300 insecure food kids and the school system wanted to establish backpack programs in all the schools. We have one program at a school where thirteen churches support it and are assigned one food item for the backpack. The school provided space for packing and storing them. At my church we support two schools and 120 kids. Reach out to others in community to find others passionate about it. Facilitator noted that you should openly communicate with the schools about the funds you have available upfront.

**Audience:** What are the funding options for a backpack program?

Panel Response: The beauty of it is that we all do it differently and no one tells us how to do it. We gather food from FBNA, VBS, Girl Scout and Boy Scout groups, home school clubs, Sunday School groups. If you have storage limits the school may have room to store it. We followed the Houston backpack program model whereby we supply enough food to sustain the backpack program but it may be supplemental food only. We pack over 43,000 backpacks each year and pack them weekly. Start where you are. We pack our backpacks right after church on Sunday and on Wednesday nights when folks are already at the church. The local schools help us unload when we deliver. It is important to get volunteers to help when they are most available. Once per year we include scarves, glove and a hat in our backpacks. I learned of another backpack program today that includes toothpaste and deodorant in theirs. When we started at my church we estimated it would cost $200 per child for the school year or $5 per child per week. We asked our congregation to sponsor a child. It is important for the church members to commit to it. We have also applied for grants through our church, the Wal-Mart Foundation and local United Way for it. I speak at local civic groups and church groups to get funding and share our dream for the community.

**Audience:** We have been told that we are not allowed to put any items with pop top cans in the elementary school kids backpacks. Has this happened to anyone else?

Panel Response: We have not had that issue. Facilitator said some school are afraid of liability but closely communicate with schools.

**Audience:** Can you buy food at FBNA?

Panel Response: At first we purchased from Sam’s Club and then learned about FBNA. Another church told us about FBNA and it has been a lifesaver. We are approved to buy backpack food items but not USDA approved to purchase those items there. We attended a short training class before we started shopping there. Gloria Hollins at FBNA purchases products specifically for the backpack program including value added products. FBNA attends to the needs of our backpack program. There is a shared maintenance fee at FBNA when you shop there. Facilitator suggested contacting Laura at communityrelations@fbofna.org if you want to shop there.

**Audience:** FBNA doesn’t have all products needed for backpacks.

Panel Response: I have preordered some products at Save-A-Lot grocery in our town. Local grocers can give you a good deal. We have ordered holiday boxes from Dollar General Market. We have a master shopping list for 10 weeks that we try to use. If you give me your email address I can email it to you. Wal-Mart Store representatives in attendance said to reach out to them for bulk orders as well and the store contacts in Huntsville are here today. An attendee brought a sample backpack bag of items that they include in theirs. Gloria Hollins at FBNA can also preorder these items. Facilitator said to reach out to Laura at FBNA on this.