

**THEPRESS**

# Dover-Sherborn students pack up school backpacks for families that need them

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When the school year begins, families have choices to make. What color backpack does my child want? Should they have three or four notebooks? How many pencils, pens and highlighters do they need?

For other families, the choice can be between groceries or school supplies, even in towns where that would not seem to be an issue.

That's where Backpacks for Kids comes in. The Dover-Sherborn High School-based charity has been helping families meet that need for 20 years. With 600-700 quality backpacks filled with supplies distributed among various charitable organizations each year, parents have one less thing to worry about.

"This is a significant cost and they make it so families don't have to think about that when the school year begins," said Beth Chambers, director of the Greater Boston office of Catholic Charities. "Having this opportunity to have a backpack filled with stuff is just a weight off the parents' shoulders."

## Putting costs behind them

Chambers said they receive 200 backpacks filled with notebooks, glue sticks, pens pencils, binders, packs of paper and more all geared toward different age groups.

"The backpacks alone are not cheap," Chambers said. "We're talking backpacks with cartoon characters for young ones, wild and crazy colors for the older ones, all patterns and colors."

Alex Goodness, 17, one of the current co-directors of Backpacks for Kids, is in his third year volunteering with the organization. He said it was a "little sad and surprising" to learn of the number of students who still need help.

"This program means that so many more kids come prepared and are ready to learn," Goodness said. "It seems like just a number but to know that every year we help 600-700 kids have a better education and it's easier for them to learn, that's what's important. We want to make learning easier for them and make sure they're prepared."

Goodness has a variety of jobs with the backpack program - from finding volunteers to do the packing to coordinating transportation of the backpacks to fundraising. The COVID-19 pandemic provided its own challenges.

"It didn't necessarily impact the number of backpacks we had to make, that number stayed about the same," Goodness said. "We needed to find a new way to pack, to touch things the least amount of times as possible and to gather people to do it in a safe environment."

To that end, Goodness said the organization ordered prepackaged supplies so volunteers just had to slip the package, rather than individual items, into a backpack.

## In need of help

Goodness's mother, Lisa Hadrick, has been volunteering with the organization since 2018 and said the pandemic has made fundraising challenging this year. The organization still needs roughly \$2,500 to meet its goal. She said all the backpacks and supplies are bought new.

"I think coming off of COVID, we have had very low donations this year," Hadrick said. "(People) were not working, everyone had a story. We need money because we promised certain supplies and a certain quality of supplies."

Three other students serve as this year's co-directors of Backpacks for Kids: Julia and Sophie Rhjin and Izzy Friedel. Julia Rhjin, 17, said volunteering with Backpacks for Kids has been a great learning experience while trying to raise the money needed for 650 backpacks during "these challenging times."

"Each year, a great number of students need our help and we strive to accommodate their needs as much as possible," Rhjin said. "It is especially heart-warming seeing the impact it has on a wide range of children. Every penny counts and we hope to encourage our peers by giving them a head start to a successful school year."

Chambers, of Catholic Charities, has worked with Backpacks for Kids since it began and is grateful for the support from the program.

"Throughout all those years, not one single backpack has sat here for more than 24 hours," Chambers said. "There are lots of backpack programs that exist and in my eyes, there's nothing that compares to what these teenagers are doing for us."

There are several ways to donate to Backpacks for Kids:

- \* Visit the website at [www.backpacksforkids.net](http://www.backpacksforkids.net)
- \* Visit the GoFundMe page at <https://gofund.me/b263dc43>
- \* Send a check to Backpacks for Kids, PO Box 232, Dover, MA 02030