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Big Blue Backpacks and the Impact of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed the world. It is hard to imagine any community service organization that has not struggled to adapt to the challenges brought on by COVID-19. While unwelcome, the pandemic has shown the resiliency of our program, Big Blue Backpacks, along with what are our most vital components. Here we reflect on the challenges we faced in adapting our organization to continue our essential work, despite the pandemic. We also share our insight into the importance of community integration for a program's longevity and adaptability.

Big Blue Backpacks (BBB) is a community service program run by Millikin University students in Decatur, Illinois. BBB began as a student organization but quickly evolved beyond Millikin University student organization requirements. The students who started BBB wanted to incorporate Decatur's community help to make this a city effort to fight food insecurity. Professor Mary Garrison is considered the Director of BBB. She helps manage the organization's funds and helps create connections around Decatur.

The organization began when a professor of behavioral sciences was informed by the principal of a local elementary school of a need for a food assistance program for the students. Dennis Lab school is a public school that currently has 445 students in attendance. In response to this request, the professor approached some of her students to run the program and became their faculty advisor. It took almost a year to plan how Big Blue Backpacks would be organized, run, and sustained. After one year of planning, the students presented their idea to the Macon County Community Foundation, asking for a start-up donation to get the program running. Five years later, Big Blue Backpacks continues to serve the students at Dennis Lab School with 85 students currently enrolled in the program. Our organization has also expanded efforts by offering weekly food donations to a food pantry outside the school where anyone in the community can come and secure the food items they may need.

Big Blue Backpacks serves weekend meals to the students of Dennis Lab for 27 weekends during the academic year. The recipients encompass all grade levels from kindergarten through eighth grade. The backpacks include: three dinner items, two breakfast items, two lunch items, two snacks, and a dessert item. At the beginning of the year, each bag goes home with a can opener, in case students do not already have one at home. The bags are filled with foods we hope kids can prepare on their own or with minimal help from an older sibling or parent/guardian. Foods like ramen noodles, canned soup, pop tarts, and granola bars fill the bags. BBB orders all the food from an Aldi food store in Decatur. Our longstanding partnership with Aldi has been invaluable to the success of our program. Every other week we place a special food order to a correspondent at Aldi. Once the order has been filled, employees set the order aside for us in the back of their store where we then pick it up and bring it to the Good Samaritan Inn. The Good Samaritan Inn is another one of our crucial community partners. The Good

Samaritan Inn is a local soup kitchen in Decatur, that serves lunch to those in need. It is here where all the food for Big Blue Backpacks are housed. In addition to storing our food, they have also kindly lent us shelving and table space to pack our food into bags.

Consistency is something we strive for when preparing the food bags. Each child receives the same foods as everyone else. To keep the bags uniform, we only ask for monetary donations from the public. The members of BBB have done well to create a community presence in Decatur. At the start of each year, the BBB team and members of Dennis Lab School come out for a press conference; either held at the school or Good Samaritan Inn. This helps kick off the year and lets the community know what Big Blue Backpacks has done over the past few years, where we are headed, and that we are still looking for donations. The community sees that BBB has an ongoing partnership with Decatur Public Schools Foundation, Aldi, and the Good Samaritan Inn. Big Blue Backpacks members have also spoken for television stations and to local groups in Decatur such as the Kiwanis Club, to help spread the word about what we do.

While we do get large donations from community agencies annually, we also receive donations from private donors. Along with these donations we also hold varying types of fundraisers. In the past, we have been hosted by restaurants in our local community including Culver's, and Texas Roadhouse. During these events, our sponsors agreed to donate a portion of the revenue made over the night to our cause. Similar events have also been hosted at Millikin University. During our last spring semester, we hosted a soup night where all proceeds from ticket sales and donations went directly to our organization.

These events serve to both maintain our savings as well as to continue raising awareness for our cause in the Decatur community. From the organization's inception, the professor who began BBB has prioritized community outreach and has helped us to create connections all over Decatur. This really is a community effort and because of the help and support from the community, we have been able to sustain ourselves even throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

When Millikin University decided to finish the semester online, due to concerns about the spread of the pandemic forcing students to return home, it was unclear how Big Blue Backpacks would respond. The BBB leadership team received many concerns from volunteers about what would happen to the students we provided food for. Because of the sudden loss of members who would be returning home for the semester, and the uncertainty of the emerging pandemic, we were unable to provide our usual bags for two weeks.

Our organization faced a very difficult task of how we would finish out the year and restart the program. However, given the additional turmoil the students faced, it was very important for BBB to be a consistent source of support to the students and families that we served. The supervising professor of the program assisted the team by helping reorganize the efforts of BBB members who would be remaining on campus. With the help of the professor and the social worker from Dennis Lab School, the remaining BBB members were able to resume packing and organization efforts.

After we had reassembled a packing and organizing team, we were tasked with getting the food to each child without being able to deliver it to their school as we had usually done. This rested in the hands of the school social worker; in a typical year, the food bags would be placed in each child's locker on Friday afternoon for them to take home. The social worker did an amazing job coordinating with the faculty members at Dennis. Around six or so teachers came together and mapped out the locations of the kids' homes. From there, each teacher took a section of ten or more kids and would drop off the bags at their doorsteps or give it to an adult at the home. We also made changes in our usual procedures to be in line with the World Health

Organization's guidelines regarding COVID-19. When packing the bags, we wore gloves, masks, and socially distanced. Teachers who dropped off the bags also wore protective measures to keep everyone safe.

The next step for keeping Big Blue Backpacks running was to make sure we had access to the food for our bags. This was probably the most important step, as if we don't have enough food, we could not continue our efforts. We have a close relationship with the manager at Aldi. As mentioned before, we typically placed special orders for our food supply, however during the pandemic, restrictions began to be placed on foods. This meant we could no longer put in special orders and had to begin making individual purchases from the store. The professor, the social worker, and a BBB team member would make special trips to Aldi together on Friday mornings. We would split the shopping list into thirds and meet up at the checkout to pay for everything, then take everything back to Good Samaritan Inn.

After a few weeks of special shopping trips, food restrictions around Illinois got tighter, meaning that we could only purchase a certain amount of canned goods, and pastas. On the third week of April 2020, these restrictions began. We were not aware of this until we got to the check-out that Friday morning. We were only allowed to purchase four canned goods and pastas per shopper. Having a good relationship with the manager at Aldi was helpful, he understood that this food was for Big Blue Backpacks and was being used to help food insecure children in Decatur. The manager was able to override the limit put on some items which allowed us to purchase more than the maximum amount put in place for these items to deter stockpiling. Items that were no longer available to us, due to the restrictions, were ramen noodles and ravioli/canned pasta. For other items, we made many small transactions to get all the food we needed.

Unfortunately, the Aldi manager was unable to provide any more overrides for future orders. However, some of the food items we usually purchased from Aldi were not restricted, such as, pudding cups and granola bars, so we continued purchasing what we could to keep our partnership strong. Despite what we could still purchase from Aldi, we again had to adapt how we would acquire the necessary food for the rest of the school year.

We have always purchased items from Aldi since it is the most efficient option for providing nutritious food throughout the year for the students. Since Aldi could no longer meet all our needs, we opted to shop at Sam's Club for the remainder of the items. While Sam's Club is more expensive, we were able to handle the unexpected additional costs because of our savings which came from contributions of our donors and funding. Unfortunately, we ran into the same problem here of limitations on how much food we could purchase. After explaining our situation to employees at Sam's Club, the employees decided they would override the limits one time for us. Luckily, this was the last shopping trip we had to do before the school year ended. Had this not been our last shopping trip of the year our backup plan was to order food from the food bank. This is not an ideal option as we would not be guaranteed a specific amount of goods and we could not guarantee consistency with each food bag.

As the new school year began, we are still following COVID-19 guidelines while packing, picking-up, and distributing the food. We are also stocking up on more food in anticipation of other food restrictions that may be enforced. Teachers at Dennis Lab School are still going door to door dropping the bags off for the students. Despite all the difficulties, we have been able to continue serving the children at Dennis Lab School.

One of our main takeaways from this experience is the importance of the connections we have within the Decatur community. It is because of our close partnership with Dennis Lab

School that began at this organization's founding that we could rely on the social worker and the teachers at the school to continue delivering the food. Despite the obstacles of food restrictions, our partnerships and standing in the community helped us get special exceptions we desperately needed at Aldi and Sam's Club. It is thanks to our many varied donors that we had the funding to continue during this crisis.

The pandemic presented many challenges for our organization, Big Blue Backpacks. However, it is through our vast network of supporters that we were able to cope with the massive disruption of COVID-19. With this in mind, our recommendation for students looking to begin an organization is to prioritize and cultivate connections within your community. Having partners from the beginning sets a strong foundation for support and funding that may be invaluable in adapting to unforeseen circumstances.