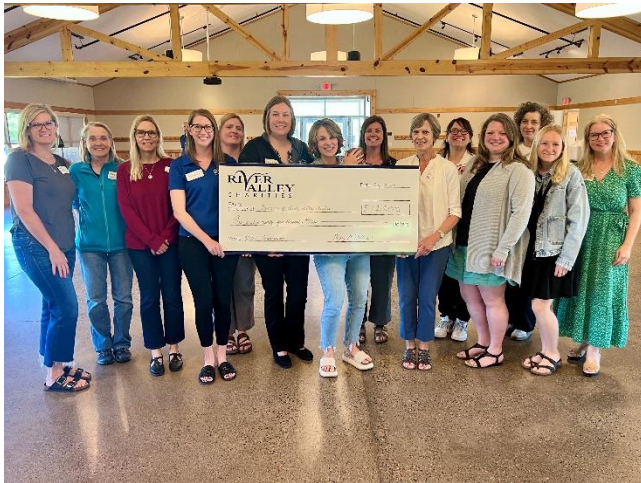


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Caption: Backpack and Food Program leaders from across the St. Croix Valley pose with a check representing \$125,000 in 2024 funding from River Valley Charities. These funds help their programs purchase food for more than 1,900 food-insecure children each week. The photo was taken at the RVC-hosted Backpack Program Roundtable on May 13th at YMCA Camp St. Croix.



Local Backpack and Food Programs Unite to Address Hunger in the St. Croix Valley

HUDSON, WI — Last month, leaders from more than a dozen hunger relief and Backpack and Food Programs gathered at YMCA Camp St. Croix to strengthen collaboration and launch a coordinated response to child food insecurity in the St. Croix Valley. Organized by River Valley Charities, Inc. (RVC), the half-day regional roundtable convened program leaders, food bank staff, government agencies, and nutrition educators to align efforts and begin planning a joint awareness campaign.

“These Backpack and Food Programs are a critical safety net for children who might otherwise go without food on weekends and during school breaks,” said Andy Johnson, Executive Director of River Valley Charities. “Yet many in our community don’t realize how many local families rely on them.”

In western Wisconsin, approximately one in six children faces food insecurity—often without visible signs of need. Hunger doesn’t just affect a child’s body; it affects their ability to learn, focus, and thrive in school—creating long-term barriers to success. The roundtable emphasized that this ongoing issue requires a connected network of support.

Understanding the Local Hunger Relief Network

The hunger relief system in the St. Croix Valley is made up of interconnected organizations, each playing a unique role:

- The St. Croix Valley Food Bank sources, purchases, and stores food in bulk, distributing it to local pantries and backpack programs. While donated food is provided to partners at no cost, the majority of what the food bank distributes must be purchased—typically at discounted rates.
- Food pantries provide free groceries directly to individuals and families, often purchasing food from the food bank and supplementing with community donations or through other distributors.
- Backpack and Food Programs send food or grocery vouchers home with students over weekends and school breaks, discreetly supporting children who may not access other assistance. These programs are typically run by a small group of volunteers and often do not receive public funding, relying instead on private donations—like those provided through River Valley Charities—to sustain their work. Food is purchased from a variety of sources, including the food bank, local grocers, and wholesalers.
- WIC and FoodWise offer nutrition education and family support. WIC provides income-based benefits and health services for pregnant women and young children, while FoodWise offers free education on healthy eating and meal planning.
- River Valley Charities works to support this network by raising funds, coordinating outreach, and advancing collaborative projects like financial literacy education and regional awareness campaigns.

Together, these organizations and others form a comprehensive safety net to ensure that no child goes hungry.

Programs Represented

The following programs were represented at the roundtable:

- Salvation Army Backpack Program of Polk and Burnett County
- Happy Kids Backpack Program of New Richmond
- Raider Network of Hudson
- Our Neighbors' Place (River Falls)
- Saint Croix Central Food For Kids Backpack Program

- Prescott Backpack Program
- Hudson Area Backpack Program
- Somerset Backpack Program
- St. Croix County WIC
- FoodWise
- St. Croix Valley Food Bank
- River Valley Charities

Collectively, these programs provide weekend meals and essential nutrition to more than 1,900 children and their families across the region each week.

Roundtable Highlights and Emerging Challenges

Participants discussed both the strengths of the current hunger relief network and the challenges it faces. A recurring concern was access to the types of food children actually need and want— particularly kid-friendly, protein- and nutrient-rich snacks and wholesome meal components. Due to rising costs and limited availability, both programs and the local food bank struggle to source these items in sufficient quantities.

Another issue is logistical: traditional Backpack and Food Programs rely on sending food home discreetly in bags, which limits what can be included. Perishable items—while ideal—are difficult to manage without refrigeration or risk of spoilage.

In response, some programs are reimagining how support is delivered. A few are moving to voucher-based models that let families shop for specific items at local grocery stores such as Ptacek’s Family Market or Kwik Trip, offering both flexibility and dignity while reducing stigma. Others are reconsidering the backpack model entirely to better meet students and families where they are—like the Raider Network at Hudson High School, which operates directly within the school and supports more than 500 student visits each week.

Participants also stressed the need to educate the public on how the hunger relief network works as a whole. From sourcing and distribution to education and direct service, each partner plays a distinct role. Understanding these roles is key to building support, reducing stigma, and ensuring sustainable solutions.

To build on this momentum, the group committed to developing a regional awareness campaign to inform the public and strengthen community support. Community members are encouraged to learn more, share the message, and support local hunger relief efforts in any way they can.

River Valley Charities will host a follow-up roundtable in fall 2025 to continue the collaboration and welcome new partners.

For more information or to get involved, visit www.rivervalleycharities.com.