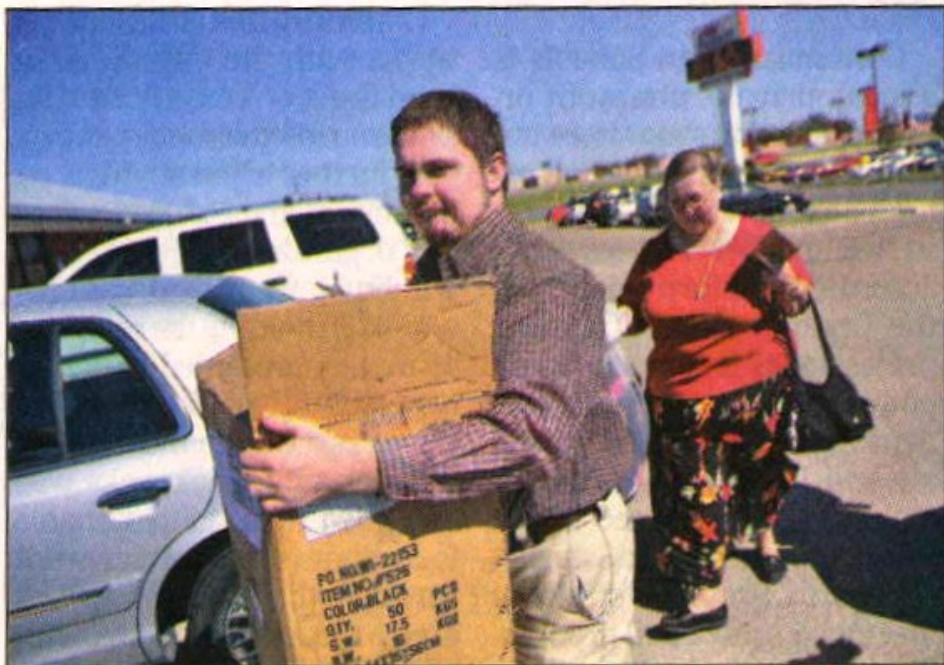


# OTC Makes a Difference with Backpacks of Food



Herald/DAVID MORRIS

**Operational Test Command intern Nate Herring carries a box of backpacks into the Communities in Schools office following a Make a Difference Day drive for the Backpack Buddy Program.**

## Area volunteers reach out to local children, schools

**By Amanda Kim Stairrett**  
Killeen Daily Herald

Try to go through the day with an empty stomach. It's probably uncomfortable and hard to concentrate, huh?

This is the life of many schoolchildren in Bell and Co-

ryell counties, but thanks to a donation by Fort Hood's Operational Test Command to a local organization, food won't be a luxury item for some.

As part of Oct. 25's Make a Difference Day, Operational

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*Please see Schools, Page B2*

# Schools: Backpacks stuffed with food

*Continued from Page B1*

Test Command soldiers and employees gathered 71 new backpacks and \$245 to donate to the Backpack Buddy Program, which is coordinated by Communities In Schools of Bell-Coryell Counties, Inc.

Representatives, including Susie Potts, wife of Col. (promotable) Curtis Potts, commander of Operational Test Command, delivered the donations to Communities in Schools on Thursday at 4520 E. Central Texas Expressway, Suite 106 in Killeen.

Students who are in the most need are given a backpack full of food on a Friday. Children can leave school and take that food home, free of embarrassment or stigma attached to accepting help.

"That's why the backpacks are so important," said Mary Erwin-Barr, Communities In Schools of Bell-Coryell Counties, Inc. executive director.

This project gave soldiers and employees a choice to donate backpacks or money, said Nate Herring, an intern in the command's public affairs office who helped coordinate the effort.

The command has always been generous, said Sherri MacWillie, Operational Test Command family readiness support assistant and another who organized the fundraiser.

Aside from Make a Difference Day activities, members of the command work closely with Santa's Workshop at Fort Hood.

Communities in Schools is a local, private, nonprofit organization that "monitors the academics, behavior and attendance of at-risk students in Bell and Coryell Counties," according to information from the organization. "Through professional campus support addressing individual student needs, increased parental and family involvement, and closely supervised activities, (Communities in Schools) strives to promote students staying in school and graduating, thereby improving their

## By the numbers

Of the more than 8,000 students Communities in Schools, Bell-Coryell Counties, Inc. served during the 2007-08 school year:

- 98 percent stayed in school.
- 98 percent improved in academics.
- 99 percent improved in attendance.
- 99 percent improved in behavior.
- 100 percent benefited from social services.
- 97 percent graduated.
- 68 percent received public assistance.
- 52 percent lived in a military family.
- 57 percent experienced family conflict or crisis.
- 65 percent were on free or reduced lunch.

Percentage of children identified as economically disadvantaged (by district):

- Salado ISD**, 26.4 percent, 332 students.
- Copperas Cove ISD**, 39.8 percent, 3,100 students.
- Belton ISD**, 45.2 percent, 3,601 students.
- Killeen ISD**, 49.8 percent, 18,209 students.
- Temple ISD**, 60.8 percent, 5,092 students.

chances to succeed in life."

During the 2007-08 school year, the organization served more than 8,000 students. Because of funding shortages this year, Erwin-Barr estimated the organization could help only 6,000. The Backpack Buddy Program provides food for at least 4,000 children, she said.

About 55 percent of the thousands the organization serves get free or reduced lunches at school. For some, those are their only regular meals. The backpack program provides food for the weekend when students aren't in school to get meals.

Communities in Schools works with the Capital Area Food Bank of Texas in Austin. That means the money it gets goes further when buying food because of the reduced prices the organization pays. This will buy tons of food, said Erwin-Barr, holding the envelope of money presented to her by representatives from Operational Test Command.

Among the backpacks was one filled with nonperishable food items. Erwin-Barr went through the bag and talked about the kind of items with which the organization fills its

For more on what Fort Hood units did for Make a Difference Day, read next week's Fort Hood Herald.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

backpacks. Meat and canned vegetables are always good, she said, as are items such as beans and pasta.

A bag of spaghetti can go a long way, she said.

"Oh, that's wonderful," she said, holding up a package of microwave popcorn. "They don't get things like that."

The troubled economy means that grant opportunities and donations are slim. Families are making tough decisions, and that means children are going without food or utilities.

Communities in Schools is preparing for the holiday season, and it is "going to be really tough for everybody," she said.

"Holidays are worrying me."

For more on Communities in Schools' programs, call (254) 554-2132.

**Source:** Killeen Daily Herald, October 31, 2008