



Expanding the World of Possibilities for Aging



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Marquis, Consonus and Vital Life Help Children go Back to School with the Right Tools



It started with an age-old tradition that all parents and children are very familiar with—back to school shopping. A vice president from Marquis Companies was shopping for back to school supplies for her children when it suddenly struck her how expensive it was to fulfill the supply list which the teachers requested, upwards of \$100 per child.

Knowing that many certified nursing assistants, maintenance crew and kitchen help in long term care barely make over minimum wage have children that also have a long list of school supplies. She wanted to somehow help those who work so hard to take care of seniors and may not get the recognition they deserve and that's how the Backpack to School program was created.

Backed by the Vital Life Foundation, a nonprofit supporting organizations that provide help to seniors and staff members working in long term care, Marquis and its sister company Consonus set out to fulfill back to school supply list for children in grades K-6 for every long term care employee within their partner communities. The program started in 2008 and has since grown exponentially to include 105 communities over seven states including Washington, said Tracy Fritts, Regional Vice President of Operations for Consonus.

Now, after completing its fourth year the Backpack to School program was able to hand out 2,969 backpacks full of school supplies to children. "It's a great opportunity to give back to people who work so hard caring for all the residents that we serve," said Kelli Carr, Washington Nurse Consultant for Consonus Pharmacy and program volunteer.

The program primarily takes place at partner communities for Marquis and Consonus. Once a commitment is established the partner community is sent all the promotional material to get the word out and to start collecting donations. Once all the donations have been collected they are shipped down to a company in Oregon called Exceed Enterprises. Exceed Enterprises is a non-profit organization that provides employment and personal development services for people with disabilities. The backpacks are stuffed full of supplies then delivered back to the communities to be handed out,



said Tracy.

While donations are being collected from partner communities, all those who work behind the scene at Marquis and Consonus are working towards receiving large donations from retailers like Target and office supply stores and working out the logistics of the entire program. “In order to keep the program going we need to have more monetary donations so we can keep the program in survival mode,” said Tracy. “We would like this program to not be a huge expense for Vital Life so we would like to break even or even semi profit would be fabulous.”



And though the process of collecting all the donations is an important part of the program, another major entity is when the children actually receive the school supplies. “It’s important for communities to embrace the partnership and see the value in it like we do. When they have the big parties and make a big deal out of it for the kids it’s really the best part of the program,” Tracy said.

The biggest reason why the parties are an important part of the commitment is to make the children feel good about receiving the backpack and so they don’t feel any different from another kid whose parents went to the store and bought their school supplies, said Kelli. Additionally, it’s a great opportunity to have a lot of fun coming up with ideas. Some of the party themes over the years have been a graduation ceremony, a science fair, an animal party and a carnival full of games, prizes and attractions. It’s also an opportunity for the residents of the community to actually give the backpack to the children which puts a smile on both their faces.

A few of the communities that participated in 2011 that are a part of the Aging Services membership were Wesley Homes, Tacoma Lutheran Retirement Community, Mirabella and Martha and Mary. With the help of these communities and many others in Oregon, California, Idaho, Nevada, Montana and Texas many parents were able to send their child off to school with their back to school supply list completed.

If your community is interested in participating in the 2012 Backpack to School program, you can contact Tracy Fritts at (503)539-7793 or email her at tfritts@consonushealth.com.

