

Plenty of Plates Program Serves Up a New Way to Approach Inclusive Team-Building



saveonmeats.ca
abetterlifefoundation.ca

OVERVIEW

Save On Meats is a full-service diner and commissary kitchen operating as a social enterprise in the downtown eastside of Vancouver. One of the ways they give back to their neighborhood is through their Plenty of Plates Program, a meaningful team-building experience that provides the opportunity for community partners to run the Save On Meats diner, cooking and serving a 3-course meal to individuals who rarely, if ever, get a sit-down restaurant experience.

OBJECTIVES

The Plenty of Plates Program (POP) was established by Save On Meats' charity 'A Better Life Foundation' to provide the following:

- Food security: Making sure that food is accessible to everyone who needs it within their community.
- Team-building: This unique program provides the opportunity for businesses to come together and make a meaningful and real difference in the community through hands-on experience.
- Education: Save On Meats (SOM) staff are onsite to give some history of the downtown eastside and insights on how to remove barriers for people living with addiction and mental health challenges.



Apple Vancouver Managers & Directors come together for a Plenty of Plates team-building evening

APPROACH

Plenty of Plates is a hands-on, 6-part, community-building experience comprised of Fundraising, Briefing and Orientation, Meal Preparation, Setting the Table, Service and Wrap-Up.

Fundraising

Volunteer host teams (consisting of 10 – 15 people) are expected to raise a minimum of \$5000 before participating in a Plenty of Plates evening. Beyond covering costs, funds go to support A Better Life Foundation's meal program, which provides food security to approximately 850 Vancouverites in need, every day. \$5000 equates to 70 three-course meals for POP and 1,250 meals through the meal program. Fundraisers will be provided with a tax receipt for their donation.

Teams have a number of ways in which they can fundraise:

- Company sponsorship in support of culture and team-building
- Employee contribution and fundraising (donation platform provided by A Better Life Foundation)
- Customer-facing fundraising

Briefing and Orientation

Before guests arrive, host teams are sat down around 5PM for an orientation. This consists of:

- A brief history of the Downtown Eastside and Save On Meats
- The state of those with barriers (drug addiction, mental health challenges etc.)
- What it's like for the locals to navigate the system (particularly those with disabilities and mental illness)
- The importance of creating food and job security

The orientation really gives a sense of the 'why' and what participants can expect by the end of the evening which typically wraps-up by 9:30PM.

Meal Preparation

After orientation, host teams are brought into the back kitchen to assist with meal preparation. This typically is split up into stations – participants work alongside SOM staff to learn about what they are going to serve, how to use certain pieces of commercial equipment and the even plating skills. This is where the team-building begins, as many participants get to see a side of their co-workers that they aren't used to, all while being trained and having fun.

"It was truly an eye-opening experience and all of our staff really enjoyed being involved in something like this. Not only was it great to interact and connect with the Downtown Eastside, but it was also a super fun team building experience for us!"

– *Amanda Schaeffer, Office Coordinator, Bellin Treasury*

Setting the Table

Once the meal has been prepped, participants now head to the diner to support with setting the table. One individual is sent to be a greeter/host at the entrance, another to support with serving drinks behind the bar (non-alcoholic), while their co-workers make sure that they have the correct amount of plates, cups and other utensils to enjoy a good meal.

Service

It's time for the guests to arrive! Since POP evenings usually attract a lot of people from the community, it's often a packed house. This means that while some host participants are in the front greeting guests and getting them settled, others stay in the kitchen to support the preparation for the following courses. The goal is to serve as many hungry people as possible, so getting the timing and amount of support needed at each station is crucial for making a successful evening.

Wrap-Up and Debrief

After all the meals have been served, it's time for the host team to come out and connect with their community. Host participants are given the opportunity to go table-to-table and ask how everyone has been enjoying their meal. Once guests have left for the evening, the host team sits down with SOM staff to reflect on the night, discuss any key moments for them, and what they learned most from the experience.

OUTCOMES

Since introducing the Plenty of Plates Program to the community, the Save On Meats Staff and their host teams have been able to serve approximately 850 meals a day, and nearly 290,000 meals a year through their meal program (according to A Better Life Foundation's 2018 Social Impact Report.)

LESSONS LEARNED

Since its inception, there has been many lessons learned when it comes to putting on a Plenty of Plates event. Key learnings include:

Manage Volunteers Expectations

It seems only natural for volunteers to assume that since they are at a diner, they are going to be able to eat. However, with the amount of work involved in the preparation and execution of the evening, guest hosts don't get an "official" time to sit down and eat, so it's been important to let them know that before they arrive. Many have also expected that they are guaranteed to have a packed house, but this isn't always the case, and that is not a reflection on them or the work they have done.



Everybody Gets Time Up Front

Every single participant has an important role to play to ensure the evening is a success. However, when a rush of hungry guests come in, this sometimes has meant that some volunteers have spent much or all their time in the back to support with meal preparation. This is only one side of the learnings, and so it is crucial that everyone gets an opportunity to be at the front of house to interact with guests.

Don't Book POP on Income Assistance Days

In order to ensure that as many community members as possible are served, SOM staff have learned not to book POP evenings on income assistance days, as this often conflicts with the guests going out to receive their cheques or they are otherwise pre-occupied.

NEXT STEPS

Save On Meats plans to continue to host Plenty of Plates evenings, ramping up to 2-3 times per week, all-year round. They hope to see the program grow and be introduced to many different businesses because of the impact it makes for the community and for the daily meal program.