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Sylvia Rector: Area restaurateurs step up in a big way for those in need

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BY SYLVIA RECTOR
DETROIT FREE PRESS RESTAURANT
CRITIC

Wednesday, as it poured rain outside, a crowd of more than 300 -- men and women, the old and the young -- stood in line at Cass Community Center in Detroit for a fresh, hot lunch from Buffalo Wild Wings and Bagger Dave's.

Many people reading this take food like that for granted, but I assure you no one there did.

"This looks like the best meal we've had in a long time," said shelter resident Sandra Brown, 45.

Usually the center has just one entrée per meal, but this time there were hot and mild wings, sloppy Daves (like Joes), black bean chili, salad and rolls and cookies and coffee.

The plates were piled high by the servers, employees and officers of Diversified Restaurant Holdings, which owns Bagger Dave's and numerous Buffalo Wild Wings locations.

No one left hungry.

It's a scene that will be replayed weekly over the next year as volunteer restaurants and catering companies each take a turn preparing and serving a midday meal at one of five designated soup kitchens through a program called Detroit Area Chefs Feed the Need.

With one lunch being served somewhere each week, more than 12,000 meals will be provided to hungry people.

With the support of the National Restaurant Association (NRA), Chefs Feed the Need programs may be replicated in cities all over the country, using Detroit as a model.

The program was founded in Charleston, S.C., by Detroit native Mickey Bakst, general manager of the Charleston Grill at the Charleston Place Hotel. When he learned that one of the city's

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largest shelters had to eliminate one meal each week for lack of funds, he picked up the phone and organized 52 restaurants to fill the gap for the next 52 weeks.

The program there is still going strong and this year won the NRA's 2011 Restaurant Neighbor Award. When talk turned to taking it national, Bakst thought Detroit would be the perfect place to see whether it could work in a major metropolitan area.

The local effort was organized by a committee led by Birmingham restaurateur Mindy VanHelleMont, who said it has not been difficult to find participants, each of which agrees to provide just one meal a year at a shelter. "It's hard to say 'no' because it's such a wonderful thing," she says.

The original goal was 52 restaurants, for the 52 weeks in a year. But since Tuesday's kickoff, the numbers have kept climbing. By Wednesday, there were 69 and verbal commitments from more. That means that some weeks, more than one center will be served.

"The goal is to keep going, so at the very least we are doing two (lunches) every Wednesday," VanHelleMont says. Other sites in the rotation are the Capuchin Soup Kitchen sites on Meldrum and Conner in Detroit and, in Pontiac, Baldwin Center and Grace Centers of Hope.

Restaurants and other food purveyors who want to join or get more information can call VanHelleMont at Tallulah Wine Bar & Bistro at 248-731-7066.

Monique Turner, corporate compliance director of Cass Community Social Services, says the program will make a difference for Cass, which serves 10,000 meals a week.

And for those at the shelter, she says, having outsiders come in to provide food and serve a meal is a great lift. "It lets the people know that they are important, that other people still care and want to help."

Metro Detroit's restaurant and food people have always been incredibly generous in helping good causes. Here's the list of the first 69:

Achatz Handmade Pie Co., Andiamo, Atlas Global Bistro, Bacco Ristorante, Bagger Dave's, Beans & Cornbread, Beaumont Hospital, Bella Piatti, Big Rock Chop House, Boston's Gourmet Pizza, Brio Tuscan Grille, Buffalo Wild Wings (Diversified Holdings) and Buffalo Wild Wings (JK&T Wings Inc.).

Café Cortina, Café Via, Capital Grill, Carrabba's Italian Grille, Cheeseburger in Paradise, Club Venetian, Cuisine, Da Edoardo Foxtown Grille, Da Edoardo Grosse Pointe, Dave & Buster's, Delaware North, Detroit Zoo, Diamond Jim Brady's.

Epoch Restaurant Group, Famous Dave's BBQ, Forest Grill, Forte-Belanger Catering, Henry Ford Hospital West Bloomfield, the Henry Ford, Huron River Club, Jeremy, Just Baked Cupcakes,

Karl's Cabin, Kosch Catering, Kruse and Muer, Marriott at Centerpoint, Matt Prentice Restaurant Group, MGM Grand Detroit, Mosaic, Motor City Casino.

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Tallulah Wine Bar & Bistro, Toast, Townsend Hotel, Treat Dreams, Village Palace, the Westin Book Cadillac Detroit, the Whitney, Whole Foods West Bloomfield, Whole Foods Detroit, Zoup!.

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