## New Matrix Meals—A model of meaningful dialogue

New Matrix Meals has proven to be a program worth repeating.

It started in Chilliwack, BC, in 2017 as an attempt to "relocate" contentious drug-related conversations away from social media and public forums toward more casual, meal-sharing environments that allow for deep listening.

"There is something about breaking bread together that can invite intimacy—that brings warmth, decency, gratefulness to the conversation," says Fraser Health's Jennifer Hawkins, working in partnership with Chilliwack's Pacific Community Resources Society. "For two years, every month we've been having New Matrix Meals in a variety of homes and venues with more than 275 different community members in Chilliwack. The events are relatively inexpensive but so meaningful."

"Each meal is different," Jennifer continues. "The project team works with each volunteer host to create a safe and non-threatening environment based on the physical environment and the host's personal or professional connections. The only 'rule' is that each meal includes a facilitator plus someone with lived experience and/or an advocate of people with lived experience."

The meal concepts have included outdoor barbecues, poker nights, and potlucks. Attendees have included decision-makers, local business owners, stay-at-home parents, professional musicians, teachers, social workers, pastors, and others with a stake in the Chilliwack community.

"We wanted to facilitate a new way of being neighbours—a new way of seeing each other, relating to one another," says Jennifer. "People can have different ways of looking at things, but these are discussed in a safe, respectful environment that enriches rather than enrages or isolates."

In the Fall of 2018, the New Matrix Meals model was picked up by the local Addictions Task Team, a committee of Chilliwack Healthier Community (CHC), and taken into uncharted territory.

"CHC has often hosted education and awareness events around addiction, but committee members have often scratched their heads about how to get 'ordinary citizens' in the room," explains Jennifer. "So, in November, we facilitated a dialogue meal with service providers, decision makers, and groups like Take Back Chilliwack, the Public Safety Committee, and the District Parent Advisory Committee. These targeted invitations brought people into the room who were angry about what they see as negative changes in our community."

The setting of the event involved small dinner tables with mixed composition, including a trained dialogue facilitator, advocates of people with lived experience (or people with lived experience, depending on several factors), and community members.

Jennifer says she and her team learned through the previous meals not to come with an agenda but to be open, listening, and inclusive.

"Disagreement can provide spaces for transformation and creativity," she muses.

In June, 2019, New Matrix Meals took another bold step with a new idea for connecting community members through a family meal.

Here are some of the highlights:

"We had 11 kids and 11 adults. My daughter babysat the kids, entertaining them with a variety of games outside and eventually an outdoor movie. We had three people with lived or living experience there, including one who brought her own child. The normalcy of it was so great—just experiencing everyday life, but with people and conversations that break down normal social constructs. For example, sitting across the table from a youth passionately speaking about challenges navigating mental health services, then two minutes later wiping tears from a kid who fell down playing ball outside. Or learning about the tangles of PWD transfers, employment, and the rising cost of food, then watching someone have a parent moment shooing kids away from the 'adult food.'"

"One of the attendees came from an immigrant experience, where values of hard work and social and economic participation often shape perspectives. After hearing about various challenges with binning and bottle collecting, this attendee offered to exchange phone numbers with one of the people with lived experience in order to establish a regular connection for empty bottle pick-ups. The attendee ended up getting neighbours involved as well, so now a townhouse complex saves up cans and bottles to make things a bit easier for one couple struggling with homelessness."

"During dessert we shared 'takeaways' from the evening or things we wished other people knew when we looked across social divides. Although this conversation was fairly deep and even personal, quite honestly, I thought the wrapping up was even better. Everyone pitched in to help clean up, packed up and distributed leftovers, and joked around while picking up trash outside. The sun had set, the kids were jumping on the trampoline, and we were all just casually mingling, tidying, and relaxing. That was the time the conversation happened where two people exchanged phone numbers that, I believe, ended up making a difference to both of them."

Interested in watching a clip of a New Matrix Meal in action? Click <a href="here">here</a> to see a short video produced by the Sto:lo First Nation, Chilliwack.