

Date: 30 June 20004

To: Board of Directors, National Museum of American History (NMAH)

Contact: Anh-Thu Cunnion

From: Public Programs Office, NMAH

Re: Community Partnership Program Proposal

Program: An American Potluck: A holistic approach to nutritional health within a community

Program description: *An American Potluck* is a six-week long after-school educational program that seeks to promote nutritional health education among African-American and Latino children living in the Washington, D.C. area. This program will unite the National Museum of American History (NMAH); the National Health Museum (NHM); corporate food stores with local markets; and local social service agencies in addressing the educational and health needs of underserved ethnic communities in Shaw, Mt. Pleasant and Columbia Heights. By focusing on the historical, cultural and nutritional roles that food plays in our lives, *American Potluck* will provide a holistic framework for children to seek ownership of their diet as they gain a better understanding of the relationship between who they are and what they eat.

Rationale: Recent movements within the museum community argue that museums have a social responsibility to “contribute to the combating of the causes and the amelioration of the symptoms of social inequality and disadvantage (Sandell, 2002).” The basis of this argument lies primarily in the status museums hold as publicly funded institutions. If museums must rely on the monies

they receive from federal grants, tax dollars, and entrance fees then they must make themselves attractive to the *entire* community, advantaged and disadvantaged included. If museums do not consider the needs and desires of all elements of their community, they forfeit the opportunity to become a meaningful player in society.

Because of their unique ability to appeal to the needs of their audiences on three different levels—as individuals, as community members, and as members of a wider society—museums can positively influence the lives of disadvantaged individuals by providing them with tools to affirm their sense of self and their connection to their community and to the greater society (Silverman, 2002). *American Potluck* embraces the spirit of this movement by focusing on two communities located in low-income neighborhoods and addressing their needs for improved nutritional education and after-school programs.

According to a 2000 census report conducted by the Urban Institute and the Fannie Mae Foundation, 65 percent of Washington D.C.'s population is non-Hispanic black and Hispanic combined. The former population outnumbers all other ethnic groups in poverty-stricken neighborhoods eight to two; the latter population showed the largest increase in percentage of population in poverty-stricken neighborhoods (Fannie Mae, 2004). Neighborhoods that fall under the definition of poverty stricken include the historically black neighborhoods of Shaw and Columbia Heights and the heavily populated Latino neighborhood of Mt. Pleasant. All three of these neighborhoods are within the immediate vicinity of the National Museum of American History and connected to the museum by direct bus lines on the public transportation system. Despite easy accessibility, these low-income populations are not actively invited to visit the museum via public programming or community outreach.

At the same time, the office of the U.S. Surgeon General, through the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, reports that disparities in overweight and obesity prevalence exist in many segments of the population based on race and ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status (USHHS, 2001). The report suggests that overweight and obesity are particularly common among minority groups and those with a lower family income, specifically in African American and Mexican American communities.

The Surgeon General's report continues with a call to action for educators and community leaders to combat this growing epidemic of obesity and “ provide age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instruction in health education that helps students develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors to adopt, maintain, and enjoy healthy eating habits (USHHS, 2001)”. By partnering in the *American Potluck* public program, The National Museum of American History can take its place in the local community by empowering its younger members to improve their health with better nutrition, form connections between the food they eat and their ethnic backgrounds, and understand their relationship to a larger society through learning about the history of food and the role it has played in the American experience.

Objectives:

- To promote more thoughtful eating habits among participants by providing them a more holistic perspective on food, including its historical and cultural role in our society.
- To advocate the importance of a healthy nutritious diet.
- To encourage participants to take responsibility for their nutrition by empowering them with basic food shopping and cooking skills.

- To establish NMAH and NMH as a safe environment for neighborhood students and their families to go after school or on weekends.

Community Partners:

Museums

- **National Museum of American History (NMAH)**, 14th St. & Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, D.C.

Mission: The National Museum of American History dedicates its collections and scholarship to inspiring a broader understanding of our nation and its many peoples. We create learning opportunities, stimulate imaginations, and present challenging ideas about our country's past.

<<http://americanhistory.si.edu>>

- **National Health Museum (NHM)**, 1155 15th St., NW, Suite 810, Washington D.C.

Mission: The National Health Museum will educate, engage and inspire people to understand the past, present and future of health and health science and empower them to act upon that information to enhance their individual, family and community health. [http://](http://www.nationalhealthmuseum.org)

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Social Service Agencies

- **Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)**, 1419 Columbia Road, NW, Washington, D.C .

Mission: The Latin American Youth Center's mission is to support youth and families in their determination to live, work and study with dignity, hope and joy. <<http://www.layc-dc.org>>

- **Community of Hope (COH)**, 1413 Girard Street NW, Washington D.C.

Mission: Community of Hope provides the tools and resources to help low-income, homeless, and underserved families and individuals in the District of Columbia move towards self-sufficiency. With the help of our supporters and strategic partners, we accomplish this goal by providing housing with supportive services, health care, educational opportunities, and spiritual support. <http://www.communityofhopedc.org>

Food Suppliers

- **Giant Food Stores**, 6400 Sheriff Road, Landover, Md.
- **Whole Foods Market**, 6015 Executive Blvd. Rockville, Md.

Audience: The target audience of *American Potluck* will be school-aged children who are affiliated with either COH or the LAYC. Two groups of eight participants (one group from each social service agency), a total of 16 children, will be recruited from the neighborhoods of Columbia Heights, Shaw, and Mt. Pleasant. The program is recommended for, but not restricted to, students who are suffering from or at-risk for adolescent obesity.

Procedure:

Part I: The Community Feast

Week One: (at NMAH) “Thanksgiving: The First American Potluck” Since Thanksgiving (despite its disrepute) is celebrated by many ethnic groups, Latino and African American included, the introductory session will use the shared experience as a backdrop to the greater discussion of community feasts. Notions of family, community and culture will emerge as

students compare and contrast how their families celebrate the holiday, what kinds of food they enjoy, the social interactions that occur throughout the day and other examples of community feasts. Students will then be asked to start thinking about planning their own community feast, to take place at a mutually agreed upon location, for which they will have to agree upon a menu and do all the food preparation.

Week Two: (at NMAH) Situated in the *American Encounters: New Mexico* exhibition, the second session will focus on themes of multicultural communities and cultural adaptation. Using the “Feast Day” exhibit as an example, a gallery lesson will examine how food can play an integral role in the expression of tradition and change within a community—specifically within the multicultural population of Santa Clara, N.M. Afterwards, participants will revisit their initial Thanksgiving discussion in order to identify evidence of cultural tradition and community evolution on their own families’ dining table.

Part II: Gone to Market

Week Three: (at NMAH) The “Charleston Market” exhibit in the *Communities in a Changing Nation* gallery will be employed as a segue-way to switch the discussion from community expression to community building. The gallery lesson for this exhibition will focus on the marketplace as a common ground for the African American population (both slaves and freemen) to create a community of their own, separate (to a degree) from the White-ruled plantations. Examples of contemporary community-building within a food store setting will be explored (i.e. local bodegas, neighborhood grocers, farmers’ markets).

Week Four: (at Fourteenth and U Farmers Market) The first half of the visit to the local farmers’ market will focus on the community building nature of the market. Participants will be

instructed to explore the farmers' market in chaperoned groups and informally interview farmers about their participation in the market community as well as their produce. They will then reconvene and, as a larger group, discuss their findings. During the second half of the visit, a certified nutritionist will lead the students through a lesson on the nutritional value of the fruits, vegetables and other foods on sale at the market. The lesson will include instruction on how to shop for the best available produce, meat, and other groceries.

Part III: In the Kitchen

Week Five: The National Health Museum's exhibition, *You Are What You Eat* educates the public on the importance of a balanced, nutritional diet to one's health. A museum educator-led tour of the exhibition will focus on the negative effects of obesity to human body and promote sensible moderate diet programs as a solution. Participants will then meet in one of the museum's classrooms to begin planning the menu for their community feast. They will be asked to consider both the cultural and nutritional value of the food they select. Once a menu has been agreed upon by all participants and vetted by the program supervisors for ease and ingredient availability, a duty list will be designed and assignments distributed.

Week Six: Working in small groups under adult supervision, participants will spend the afternoon preparing a community feast for members of both social service agencies. Once the feast is prepared and community members assembled, participants will give a brief explanation of the dishes they selected. The program will culminate in a shared community potluck honoring both the Latino and African American cultures of the participants as well as a healthy nutritious lifestyle. Participants will each receive a cookbook containing the recipes they selected along with notes on their nutritional value.

Budget:*Possible granting sources:*

D.C. Department of Health

U.S. Department of Agriculture

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Income

Grant funding	\$1000
Staff time	in kind
Space rental (@ social service agency)	in kind
Space rental (@ NMAH & NHM)	in kind
Donated groceries	500
Donated cooking utensils	350
Donated dining utensils	150
Total	\$2000

Expenses

Staff

NMAH Museum Educator (1)	in kind
NHM Educator (1)	in kind
Nutritionist honorarium	\$300
Social service agency workers (4)	in kind

Facility Rental

NMAH & NHM classroom space	in kind
Kitchen space at social service agency	in kind

Supplies

Groceries	\$500
Cooking utensils	350
Dining utensils	150
Beverages	100
Classroom supplies	100
Incidentals	300
Cookbook duplication	200

Transportation

Metrobus fare (20 @ \$2.50 RT) = \$50	
4 field trips total (x4)	200
Total Expenses	\$2000

Evaluation: An immediate indicator of the success or failure of the educational aspects of the program can be derived by the content of the cookbook. If the participants include recipes that reflect the content and spirit of the program, then the objectives of the program were achieved. Proper summative evaluation of the *American Potluck* program, however, would require long-term monitoring of the participants' diet and overall health. This may prove to be difficult because of the itinerant nature of clients at Community of Hope and, to a lesser extent, the Latin American Youth Center. However, social service agency workers could monitor the short-term affects of the program by unobtrusive observing the participants once the program has ended and the participants return to a regular after-school activity schedule.

Discussion: The logistics of this program are complex and require the collaborative efforts of many organizations and individuals. During the brainstorming phase of planning, many alternative components and approaches were considered. Ultimately, the design of the program as it is described above, was deemed best suited to address the needs of the program's many stakeholders as well as accommodate the missions of all the partners involved.

Despite the many debates that arose concerning the safety and manageability of the cooking component, the program developers felt that it was important to provide the participants with as many interactive, hands-on experiences as possible. According a recent survey of 1,000 children aged 10 to 17 years, nearly 90 percent of participants feel proud when they have cooked something (Betty Crocker, 2004). The report suggests that teaching children to cook may improve their self-esteem, mood, and feelings of family cohesiveness. The suggestion of these benefits alone compelled us include the cooking component in the hopes it may offset the social

ills faced by the participants, all of who come from impoverished urban neighborhoods that suffer from increased occurrences of gang violence and homelessness.

Another aspect of the program that became a subject of much debate was the simultaneous focus on both the African American and Latino communities when perhaps involving one community at a time would allow for a more concentrated effort and streamlined cultural component. The decision to include both ethnic communities stemmed from NMAH's dedication to "inspiring a broader understanding of our nation and its many peoples." By providing a forum for cross-cultural learning, program developers felt that NMAH would be consistent in its mission and, at the same time, take a significant step towards becoming more involved in its local communities through its public programs.

As of 2002, the National Museum of American History's public programming efforts included partnerships with corporations and governmental agencies—in most cases, local school districts (NMAH, 2002). In order for *An American Potluck* to work successfully, NMAH must expand the scope of its partnership possibilities to include a wider variety of institutions while, at the same time, narrowing its audience focus to a local level. As "the nation's attic," the Smithsonian attracts millions of visitors from around the country each year as a must-see tourist attraction. However, the institution's dearth of community-oriented initiatives leaves little incentive for local populations to find a similar "must-see" relevancy. By combining its outreach efforts with those of other non-Smithsonian museums in order to engage in partnerships with communities on a grassroots level, NMAH can reposition itself, and the larger institution, as a true member of the Washington, D.C. community, willing to contribute to its needs and share in its concerns. Instead of being just a mere tourist attraction, NMAH can instead be a valued community treasure.

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