Edwards Lifesciences’ staff kitchen plates up meals for the homeless

The cafe is working at just 60% of its normal capacity since the lockdown with a portion of its 50-member catering staff on paid leave at home. Why not put them to work, a company executive asked.
Scott Ullem was trying to come up with ways to raise money for an Orange County coronavirus fund when a novel idea struck him.

Rather than just raising cash, how about using his company's underutilized kitchen to turn out meals for the homeless, the Edwards Lifesciences chief financial officer thought.

After all, the Irvine-based medical device manufacturer — on partial lockdown since the COVID-19 outbreak shuttered a major portion of the U.S. economy — has a 7,000-square-foot commercial kitchen at its LINC Café.

The cafe is working at just 60% of its capacity with a portion of its 50-member catering staff on paid leave at home.

Why not put them back to work providing a desperately needed community service?

Starting Monday, April 21, that's just what Edwards Lifesciences did.

The manufacturer of heart valves, monitors and catheters has cooked more than 400 meals a day and delivered them to shelters operated by Mercy House and the Illumination Foundation.

Edwards is paying all the costs, including $1,500 a day for food.

“It’s important to think differently and find new ways to help above and beyond the norm,” Ullem said.

“In a moment like this, you want to be a contributor,” added Amanda Fowler, Edwards’ senior director of global corporate giving. “And it’s a pretty phenomenal way to leverage our kitchen, a cost we’re already incurring.”

The contribution is sorely needed at a time when California is scrambling to shelter more than 150,000 homeless people, a population that’s particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus, said Shelley Hoss, chief executive of the Orange County Community Foundation, which helped connect Edwards with local homeless shelters.
Homeless agencies have been hit with a perfect storm of surging demand for their services when funding is tight and fundraising activities are curtailed.

“One of their biggest challenges is feeding children and adults in their care,” Hoss said. “They have all of their clients, all day long, eating three meals a day.”

Larry Haynes, executive director of Mercy House, said his agency has been feeding about 1,000 people a day at its Southern California facilities, including about 800 in Orange County. That's 3,000 meals a day, plus 1,000 snacks.

Homeless shelters have been struggling with occasional food shortages and price gouging by providers, Haynes said.

“It's been a challenge for our food supplier, so a contribution like this comes at a really good time for us,” said Haynes, who's been getting about 235 meals a day from Edwards. “Those are 235 meals a day we're not paying for. That's a big deal. … That's a substantial savings for us. It's deeply appreciated.”

The Illumination Foundation is getting 175 meals a day to help it feed about 400 homeless residents. The foundation's staff was under pressure to find and distribute 1,200 meals daily, so getting the prepared food “is just huge,” foundation President and CEO Paul Leon said.

“For the community to come together to take care of this underserved group is just a blessing,” he said.

Stepping forward is nothing new for Edwards Lifesciences.

Philanthropy is a major part of the company's mission. It gives about $10 million a year in grants and donating heart valves, sensors and critical-care monitors to hundreds of charitable organizations around the world. The company, which employs 14,000 globally, also encourages its workforce to volunteer and contribute to their local communities.

“We want to give more than we take,” said Fowler. “We want to make it simple for (employees) to give back.”

Edwards also has donated about $1 million in 19 COVID-focused grants since the outbreak began, including donations of personal protective equipment to healthcare workers in China at the beginning of the outbreak.

Some employees with healthcare backgrounds have been given paid leave to work in hospitals during the crisis.

The company also accelerated the issuance of nearly $1 million in annual giving normally disbursed in October.
The LINC Café typically serves about 2,000 meals a day at Edwards’ Irvine campus, where 4,500 people work.

Manufacturing has continued since the stay-at-home order took effect March 19, but those employees able to work from home are absent. As a result, the cafe serves just 1,250 meals, available free of charge during the crisis or for the price of a donation to the Second Harvest Food Bank, Fowler said.

Hoss said she is hoping other companies will follow Edwards’ lead.

“There could be multiple examples of companies activating their kitchens for the community,” she said.

Edwards has not determined how long it will donate the meals but plans to keep cooking for at least the next month, Fowler said.

“As long as we have resources available that don't impact our normal course of business, I think we'd like to support our community,” Fowler said. “It's a source of pride, but it's also a huge source of happiness and connection.”