

Improving Food Service in the MDOC

Despite four years of positive media attention to prison reform, little has changed at the state or federal level. Pie in the sky liberals want to eliminate bail bonds, letting murderers walk free, while Republicans act so conservatively that no real change occurs. Instead of retreating to our own corners to spew political fireballs after one another, we need to simply sit down and work out concise, detailed pieces of legislation. This requires input from prisoners and formerly incarcerated people, individuals who have been largely ignored and maligned. Only with their knowledge can we make prisons into habitable, bastions of rehabilitation. A prisoner advocate organization called Mi-Cure wrote a request for prisoner suggestions on problems with the MDOC's food service. The following is a modified version of my response:

1. Every facility should have a digital camera available for taking pictures of food in trays and pans whenever prisoners request it. There is no way to hold staff accountable if prisoners do not have any proof that food service did not serve the appropriate quantity, quality, or if an insect was found in the portion (I have seen two close friends find them on separate occasions within my five years at MTU). If the MDOC already has a policy requiring staff to take such pictures, MTU and other facilities do not follow it.

2. The health department should make regular, impromptu visits as well as talk to inmates, including food service workers and block reps to learn about potential health violations. Currently, health departments must seek approval for entry, giving local institutions notice time to prepare, and inspectors rarely consult with inmates.

3. Inmate food service workers need to be trained in proper hygienic practices and then held accountable when they fail to practice them. Shockingly, workers regularly slide pans across trays that currently have food on them, and sometimes they even reuse dirty trays and cups after dropping them on the ground. I have seen the first issue many times, usually when workers are trying to trade out empty pans for full ones while the tray counter has a bunch of trays on it. I have seen the latter issue only a few times at MTU. In response to my complaints about these issues, supervisors shake their heads, laugh and inform me that most of their workers are RTP (Residential Therapy Program), implying that people with mental health

issues are untrainable, even though these supervisors often do not even attempt to reprimand their subordinates for hygiene violations. In other words, the grievance respondent did not say they were going to try harder, but blamed administrators for forcing her to work with such individuals.

4. Staff need to be more diligent about making sure food service workers wear beard guards, even over their COVID masks. I cannot tell you how often line workers do not wear one or both of them, or how many times I have found hair in my food.

5. MTU regularly serves undercooked poultry, and many people have gotten sick from it in recent months. Many food service workers at MTU confirm that supervisors do not test the food's temperature before taking it out of the oven and I have never seen them use a thermometer while the food is on the serving line cooling.

6. As far as food quality goes at MTU, we should eliminate the chili, meat balls and salisbury patty (aka cat head) meals from the state wide menu, as they are disgusting regardless of what facility I have been at. If someone filed an FOIA request on the number of people who visit the chow hall during these meals, you will find that only a 1/3 of the population participate in them. The smell alone often makes me nauseous.

7. Supervisors often make workers use the wrong serving size for many food item, or workers shake so much out of the spoon that inmates only receive only half of what they are supposed to get. Further, supervisors make food workers do the most shaking on food items that are the most desired, such as the main entree and deserts. This is a serious problem, as the other half of the tray (dirty potatoes, over cooked vegetables, wilted/slimy lettuce, etc.) is often inedible. Food service at MTU also seems to be very inconsistent with their cake and cookie sizes, which indicates that food workers don't measure out the pieces before cutting them, or they do not use the proper scooper or pan. For instance, cakes are cooked on flat pizza pans, which thins the edges to a 1/4 inch thick instead of the regulation size (1 inch?). Food supervisors should correct such portion discrepancies at the line when a serving is obviously too small, but they usually do not.

8. MTU likes to freeze many of its foods, and then serve it frost bitten or all dried out, especially the desserts. Several food service workers have told me they re-serve the vegetables and other items in this manner, which

is a public health violation.

9. Any improvements in food quality and quantity will be difficult to implement without a more robust accountability system, as MDOC staff is notorious for ignoring grievances. If they do answer them, it's a lie or a convoluted excuse, either of which would be understandable if the staff member responsible was quietly reprimanded to stop ongoing issues. Often, it is the grievance coordinators (who are usually former C/Os) themselves who sabotage grievances, claiming procedural errors. Therefore, grievance coordinators need to be disciplined or replaced. Meritorious issues need to be answered regardless of a prisoner's procedural mistake, as failing to do so is a security issue. Most prison rioters base their actions at least partly on poor food quality.

The MDOC could do a few things to make the grievance procedure fairer, such as making grievance coordinators centrally located in Lansing to avoid conflicts of interests, such as interpersonal relationships and pressure from the warden. The MDOC should also extend the time for attempting to resolve grievances as well as for filing them, as the current 2 and 5 day deadlines, respectively, make it nearly impossible to resolve claims before filing said grievances, causing claims to expire or unnecessary grievances to be filed before staff members can solve the issues through the kite system. Wardens and supervisors who fail to resolve inmate claims that occur repeatedly in their facilities need to be disciplined, rather than promoted, which is the current MDOC method of transferring troublesome employees. Seriously; ask any inmate who has done significant time and they will confirm this fact. If a warden is tired of hearing complaints about a staff member, it's easier for them to promote than initiate disciplinary proceedings.

*If the MDOC cannot responsibly reprimand itself, a civilian oversight committee needs to be formed, which has the power to reprimand and fire employees.

10. The Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) should be altered and replaced, as prisons need federal oversight if real change is to occur, as I explain in my article "Corruption Behind Bars," which can be found at <https://apwa.dhinitiative.org>. States will continue to flaunt federal law and constitutional procedures as long as there are no consequences. The current system relies on poorly educated prisoners with no resources to hold an all powerful system accountable, and then the courts pretty much take the prison authorities' position regardless of how nonsensical. Usually, this

occurs by making some sort of procedural default that is more imagined than

real. They essentially hold pro se petitioners to a higher standard than trained attorneys. This system is simply designed to avoid scrutiny.