

# Food Service Disaster

essay

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There's no secret that when it comes to food service at incarceration facilities, inmates are faced with conditions less than suitable. This is not least because the presentation of many prison food trays makes them undesirable at sight, but also because of distasteful foods due being served cold, ill-prepared foods, unsanitary conditions inmates perpetually find themselves in when dining at prison canteens, and a host of other items.

Here at Belmont C.I. the food is so deplorable many persons have decided to never eat anything from the canteen, choosing instead to prepare their meals in housing units on the daily basis with purchases made from commissary. This brings true what was asserted by an Indiana State inmate some time ago. This inmate revealed to Prison Legal News (as was printed in their Jan., 2020 issue) that Bramark, which is the food service agency contracted by the State of Ohio, hence here at Belmont, purposely prepare foods that is less than up to standards in order to boost sales of outlets where foods are promoted and sold on the prison compound; that is, outlets also operated by Bramark (Inc).

In the case of Belmont there's an Ina affiliated company known as Fresh Favorites (FF). Throughout a given year FF post fliers in all dorms of the compound and in the kitchen to promote particular food items. The prices for the items are astronomical by all stretches of the imagination. However, the items are very well cooked and tasty. FF also have a menu for visitors. Hence when a inmate is visited by loved ones, they can order from FF and receive quality foods though expensive — oblivious,

unless told by the ward of the state whom they have come to sojourn with, of the fact that this same agency is possibly responsible for disease and sickness of many in the prison population. In fact, according to the same Prison Legal News article mentioned in the previous paragraph, "[P]risoners have an elevated risk of contracting food-borne illnesses that is six times the rate of the general population."<sup>1</sup>

Part of the reason why the risk of sickness is so great is possibly due the prison population is served so much ground chicken.

Take a look at the 2022 Men's Fall/Winter Master Menu (Weeks 1, 2, and 3) which is attached to the appendix of this essay. You'll notice the names of several common meals such as Burrito Filling, Sloppy Joe, Hearty Chicken Stew, Stroganoff, etc.. Quite a few dishes are clearly advertised as "Chicken" this or that.

Every single one of these dishes is prepared with ground chicken. According to the Consumer Report Magazine (CR), October 2022 edition, 25 percent of the ground chicken tested by poultry producers may contain salmonella. Up to only 9.7 percent of whole chickens, and 15.4 percent of chicken parts may be infested with this bacteria. CR also conducted tests of ground chicken they purchased from different stores around the U.S. and found salmonella in 23 of 75 of the samples.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly ground chicken in such volumes as being served by a prison is not a prudent choice if the objective is to ensure a healthy population within institutions of involvement. Compounded with other readily unsanitary conditions of prison life there's no wonder sickness is excessive within prison rates.

"Atrocious is how guards at New York's Westchester County Jail,

whom initiated a boycott against Afa, described the company. Michigan State Senate Minority Leader Jim Manich averred Afa "jeopardized the health and safety of inmate and prison employees alike". He further stated after Michigan's Department of Corrections canceled Afa's contract, that it had been "a nightmare from day one."<sup>1</sup>

Michigan and Ohio prisons both were serving rat-and-worm-infested meals based on complaints highlighted by the Incarceration & Education Coalition which had recorded evidence of such; both were under contracts with Afa at the time.<sup>1</sup>

As outlandish as it all is, one would have to witness for themselves the shenanigans going on in a kitchen or a dining hall run by Afa to truly grasp in full the depths of how sickening operations are. Afa operations are an anti-thesis of almost everything expected to be of a respectable agency specializing in food services.

Beginning October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022, I sent weekly ekites (every Sunday) to Afa food services to advise about what I believe was wrong with the food during the previous week. The response was always either a loose affirmation of the grievance, or an Afa supervisor or manager contending the foods are like on the days they're on the clock.

Below is a copy of two of those grievances and the responses:

ekite sent on 10-30-22

Tues. 25<sup>th</sup>: insufficient quantity of food. While some receive two biscuits at about 2 to 3 sq. in. in size (about 1/2 in. thick), others, such as myself on said date, received ones about 1/2 in. thickness (or less). Some Afa mark

workers allow extras to be added, others — such as Mr. Dorman whom is known for his insolence — disrespectfully deny any request for more food. Is there not a particular caloric count deficiency in this matter?

Sat. 29<sup>th</sup>: cheese sauce served at lunch was more like water with cheese sauce added. What was served for dinner was indescribable; the menu conveys chicken ziti would be served, but what inmates received was a mash of something that took to the shape of the scoop it was served with; it appeared to be a glob of something gooey... emulsified by its own properties. (Note: all things described in this grievance are regular occurrences)

response from S. Pabin on 11-1-22

I understand that you are providing feedback regarding meals and portions.

I eat every meal when I am on grounds and they are always acceptable.

skite sent on 12-18-22

Dec. 13<sup>th</sup>: biscuits were cold as it pulled from cooler before serving. When I told inmate workers — whom now often man positions former workers used to man, including ensuring inmates scan their I.D. badges before taking a tray — they responded by saying biscuits are ALWAYS served at room temperature. When I told Mr. Pabin (Frank manager) biscuits were cold he said "Okay" as if to say "so what's new"? When I asked could I get hot/warm

biscuits he said no.

Response from J. Schiffer on 12-25-22

Biscuits are stored and served at room temperature. They are stored during service in a portable box without any heating or cooling.

What I describe in my complaints are not exaggerations; and as noted in the complaint sent on 10-30-22, it's frequently impossible to tell what we're being served. The menu may convey one thing, but what we're doled out is closer to resembling something one would serve a dog.

It's a wonder why inmates have not rioted in response to such substandards as it relates to prison comestibles. Again, many have chosen to simply stay away from the chowhall, but the Prison Legal News article I've cited several times in this piece do speak of a prison riot nearly occurring at Hamilton County Justice Center in Cincinnati, Ohio regarding Kra's food service inefficiencies... recent as of June, 2020.

I'd be remiss in my assertions without broaching nutritional matters and how a lack of proper nutrition is likely contributing to the deteriorating health of persons whom are supposed to be fed a balanced diet while serving time. The 2019-2020 Inmate Handbook, on page 68, states "[a]ll meals meet or exceed recommended daily dietary allowances for good nutrition." But under just moderate scrutiny what becomes evident is a lackluster attempt by Kra to provide even a remotely close satisfactory serving of foods meant to sustain good health.

Vegetables are served often but they're mostly nutritionally de-

icient due extreme overcooking. The only whole fresh fruits served are apples and bananas. No citrus fruit or leafy greens are ever served.

These revelations alone, as mentioned above, is possibly enough to infer fra is wanting in assessments as suitable for maintaining health considered to be on par with what many health professionals would deem fair... let alone good.

To delve somewhat deep into what this means, let's take a closer look at some negatives of a diet void of leafy greens.

According to The World Book Encyclopedia leafy greens such as spinach is rich in antioxidants. Without antioxidants what's known as free radicals (unstable molecules) take form at the molecular level of the body... basically due to oxidation. Once this process begins, damage to cells and/or changes in genes can occur. Studies suggest a diet rich in antioxidants reduce the risk of disease as antioxidants stymie the oxidation process which would then lead to disease.<sup>3</sup>

It's worth noting all deep green and yellow foods entail antioxidants, specifically ones (antioxidants) known as carotenoids. But since Belmont Institution, and likely other Ohio state penitentiaries, and possibly penitentiaries throughout the country on a whole in places where fra is at the helm of dictating food service operations, is serving no leafy greens, serving vegetables that are overcooked, and serving only apples and bananas when it comes to whole fruits, the likelihood of the prevalence of disease/sickness among the prison population is overwhelming. And trust this, I've witnessed sickness in the prison population during my approximate seven year stint that is unbelievable, especially during the 2020 COVID outbreak.

Portions is another aspect of inefficiencies as it pertains to Dr's seemingly automatic do-wide nature. Over the years we've watched portions dwindle consistently. For example, inmates used to be served two half pints of milk seven days a week with every breakfast; that has dwindled to one milk save for the three days of each week when cold cereal is served.

There used to be several days within the three week menu rotation where we were served cake, brownies, or baked cookies along with either apples or bananas. Now we're served either one or the other. So though the menu may express cake or baked goods of some sort is being served along with fruit, we're only allowed one of the two. Inmates have the option of requesting fruit instead of cake/baked goods before taking a tray. Pancakes are noticeably smaller (and so hard they are inedible sized tins), and several other food items are served in scant amounts.

Reportedly (as of Feb, 2018) Dr receives \$60 million from the State of Ohio to provide meals to some 50,000 incarcerated persons at \$1.31 per meal.<sup>4</sup> Meals at this cost is about one third of what it cost to feed inmates at a particular corrections facility in Minnesota according to Tim Thielman, a prison food administrator and ex-president of the Association of Correctional Food Service Affiliates. Thielman contends it's "hard to believe" private food contractors could be under such a contract, i.e., that enables a food tray to cost the state only \$1.31.<sup>2</sup>

Seems to me it's being implied by Thielman that if food trays can be at such a low price, something, such as quality and quantity will be compromised. Thus we can with reason conclude Dr's gross imperfections are a reflection of a shoddy contract geared towards strictly profits, not high quality services. So then it's obvious why portions are constantly hailed back, especially in an economy where inflation (as of Jan, 2023)

have been on a steep incline.

You'd think a company with a track record as such, as is being exposed by persons or agencies whom have had dealings with AFA, would at least ensure cleanliness is at the forefront of any operations. Not so.

Imagine a dining area where it's a challenge to find a seat due the many tables with residual foods strewn about; imagine grabbing a food tray where the underside of the tray is caked with foods that litter the line in which the tray have traveled... i.e., before the tray finally reach you, and no napkins are available. How about going to get a cup of coffee or juice from containers that hundreds and hundreds of people have touched before you. What I mean is the containers holding coffee/juice are the type that have levers or buttons one must maneuver/push in order to receive the beverage.

Earlier in this piece there was a mention of "readily sanitary conditions". The conditions just spoke of, as in dirty tables and trays, and levers/buttons touched by many individuals are examples of such. And here is where I want to be clear, the state is just as much at fault as AFA in these regards as the state is aware of double-capacity-filled prisons and understand the dangers of close proximity living. It's hard to point the finger at AFA for their foul doings regarding cleanliness and not point that same finger at the state whom have the power to assess these situations and literally warn the billion dollar food giant, and/or set in place legislation to address conditions leading to these horrific realities.

Speaking of horrific realities, imagine a food service agency serving food marked "not for human consumption" to unaware customers. This is just what AFA was doing in at least three Ohio prisons — two in which I had to go through (reception centers) before arriving here at Belmont. All three

at these prisons had a slew of inmates, all whom worked in the kitchens, whom spoke of seeing boxes or plastic wrappings marked "not for human consumption."

As unbelievable as it may seem, there was a federal lawsuit pending regarding this very situation back in late 2017. However, the lawsuit was pertaining to for Oregon prisons; see Lyons V. Peters, U.S.D. (D. Ore.), Case No. 3:17-cv-00730.

It is unclear as to whether the Oregon prisons had a contract at the time the allegations were made. But bear in mind there are other contractors hired by particular states to handle food services in prisons. The likelihood these contractors result to unethical doings, based on how persons convicted of crimes are treated in general, is high. There should be no surprise food contractors would opt to serve inmates stock-feed if doing so will result in a bottom-line that saves the company money.

The federal courthouse of Cleveland, OH — and/or Toledo, OH — was made aware of these happenings (the not for human consumption foods) by way of a letter in late 2019. Sometime in 2021 several kitchen workers reported to me they were no longer seeing labels on boxes/wrappings as described.

If these are the levels some food service contractors are willing to stoop to, one has to wonder of the things going on that are never brought to light.

In my opinion the State of Ohio ought bail out of its partnership with ARA and search for a food service company with an interest to make quality and ethics prized priorities. If a food service company of this type can't be acquired the state should then revert back to handling

all food operations of prisons themselves. In going this route it'll be one less stressor for the prison population, hence less chance of an explosion of violence which it seems would be in the best interest of all.

### References

- 1 Douglas Arkley; Prison Legal News; "Prisoners, Students, Guards Protest Wamark"; Jan., 2020; pp. 34-35
- 2 Consumer Report; "Making Poultry Safer to Eat"; Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention; Oct., 2022; pp. 5 (CR.ORG)
- 3 Jeffrey B. Blumberg; 2022 Edition, The World Book Encyclopedia, 1d; "Antioxidant"; 2021; pp. 557; World Book Inc., Chicago, IL
- 4 Christopher Zookis; Prison Legal News; "Ohio Experiences Continued Problems with Wamark"; Feb., 2018; pp. 40-41

Appendix — see attached 3 week rotation menu. Please note: the meals are served on a 3 week rotation schedule. I beg of you do not get caught up in the title of these menu items. Though they may sound delectable, the sight of a good many of these items are a total turn-off. Oftentimes it's impossible to even determine what's being served as these dishes are served in a glib hearing resemblance to dog food; this is not an exaggeration. (Also note oysters, though listed on the menu, haven't been served since 2018; and lastly, often what's listed isn't served at all but instead substituted without warning.)

Correction: on page 9 of this piece it is written "and/or Toledo, OH"; this is incorrect. It should be "and/or Youngstown, OH".

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