

Philadelphia Improves Food Options in Correctional Facilities



Diet plays an important role in a person's overall health. Lack of access to healthy food can increase the risk of health problems such as hypertension, also known as high blood pressure.¹

People who are incarcerated report that limited healthy food options can result in weight gain, [hypertension](#), type 2 diabetes, and other health problems.

The [Philadelphia Department of Public Health](#) worked collaboratively with the [Philadelphia Department of Prisons \(PDP\)](#), through the PDP's contract administrator, to implement nutrition standards for all food served and sold to correctional staff and people who are incarcerated in PDP facilities.

Public Health Challenge

In general, people who are incarcerated may not have many healthy food options. The options for meals in correctional facilities are usually high in starch and processed meats and relatively low in fruits and vegetables.²



Many people who are incarcerated report that there is a lack of variety in the meal options and that they cannot add or refuse portions. Because of repetitive meal options, inmates report either gaining weight or relying on purchased foods—which are also highly processed—rather than eating the meals. This lack of healthy food options in correctional facilities also affects the correctional staff.

Approach

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health worked in collaboration with the PDP to incorporate the city's nutrition standards into the food service request for proposals to make sure that the new food service provider could meet the standards for both inmate and staff menus. Public health staff worked in collaboration with the contracted food service provider to train food service staff and review menus for compliance with nutrition standards.

The Department of Public Health also worked in collaboration with PDP staff to conduct a survey of incarcerated people about their food preferences and nutritional needs. The goal was to use the survey results to inform the addition of healthier options to the commissary and food-for-purchase menus.

When new food options were added to menus, the amount of sodium in a 4-week cycle menu for people who are incarcerated decreased by

31%

Sales figures from purchased foods indicate that healthy food options are popular among the incarcerated population

“Over the past 4 years, we’ve made measurable changes to support the health of our corrections officers and our inmates.... I really thought that making the inmate menu healthier was going to increase costs, but in fact, it really hasn’t.”

— **Deborah Snyder**
Contract administrator, PDP

Results

After these changes to the menu and purchased food were made, 18 of the 28 highest sodium food products on the regular inmate menu were replaced with lower sodium alternatives. More than half of the menu items for inmates were affected by recipe changes to reduce sodium content.

New options were added to the commissary and purchased foods menus, including prepackaged entree salads, lower sodium snacks, dried fruit, and nuts. PDP also added healthier choices to correctional staff’s daily menus, including a salad bar and fruit-based desserts.

After this intervention, the amount of sodium in the 4-week cycle menu for inmates decreased by 31%, to an average daily sodium intake of 2,280 milligrams, which is lower than the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025](#) recommendation for daily sodium intake.¹ Though some lower sodium product substitutions did cost more, the food service provider made other changes to ensure that overall costs did not increase.

Sales figures from commissary and other purchased foods indicate that the healthy food options are popular among the incarcerated population: When a healthy entrée is on the purchased foods menu, it is consistently the second most popular item (out of seven options) by sales volume.

What’s Next

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health will continue its collaboration with PDP to provide and promote healthy menu and food options in the PDP facilities. In its most recent request for proposals, PDP accepted the Department of Public Health’s suggestion to include a requirement to report information on all food products purchased.

The PDP, the Department of Public Health, and the food service provider will work together to review the menus quarterly to provide feedback on menus and healthy food programming.



Find Out More

Learn more about the [City of Philadelphia Nutrition and Physical Activity Program](#).

Use the [SRCP Implementation Guide](#) to apply sodium reduction strategies derived from the SRCP into your communities.

References

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025](#). 9th Edition. Washington, DC: USDA; 2020. Accessed August 9, 2021.

² Impact Justice. [Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison: Executive Summary](#). Oakland, CA: Impact Justice; 2020. Accessed August 9, 2021.