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The High Costs of Cheap Food: Eating in West Virginia Prisons

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Story Spotlight A Tale of Two Kitchens

When I arrived at Lakin Correctional Center in 2007, I was told by several residents that all newbies had to work at least 90 days in the prison's kitchen. A few days later, several of us new residents were called to the job coordinator's office. We lined up single file against the wall and stepped up to her door one at a time to sign our job contract — an agreement to work for a starting wage of approximately \$26 a month. One woman said she would not sign the contract because she did not want to work in the kitchen. A few minutes later, two correctional officers ("COs") showed up and told her to sign it. She refused. The COs cuffed her hands, shackled her, and led her away.

The kitchen was hard work. We had a 4 a.m. wake-up call so that we could shower, dress, and receive medicine before reporting to work. We were issued state boots to work in, and they were the most uncomfortable shoes I had ever worn. My feet hurt from the long hours. We spent 12 hours a day in the kitchen: three days on with four days off and vice versa. The most difficult part of the week was truck day. A large truck would deliver all of the food to the back dock. We would have to unpack it and load it onto carts before taking it to the dry storage or the refrigerated room. The bags of flour, brownie mix, potatoes, and cans of tomato sauce were large and heavy. At the end of the day, we would roll bins full of trash and uneaten

food out to the dumpster and throw the bags in. Sometimes they would burst and cover us in food slop. Despite the hard work, I stayed on for a year and worked my way up to become a cook.



Women incarcerated at Lakin Correctional Center work in a garden.

Source: "Annual Report Fiscal year 2008-2009" (Charleston, WV: West Virginia Division of Corrections, December 2009), 34, https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/Documents/annual_reports/AR2009.pdf (accessed August 3, 2022).

Back then prison food was good. We had broccoli, fresh greens, tomatoes, cucumbers, and real potatoes. Fresh veggies came from a garden that was cared for by residents who were allowed to work outside of the prison. Lakin also had a greenhouse for residents who were enrolled in the prison's Culinary Arts program. They would share the extra veggies with the prison kitchen so that the whole population could enjoy them.

As a cook, I took pride in the food I prepared. We made pulled pork with coleslaw, Kielbasa with sauerkraut, oven-baked ham, and my favorite: oven-fried chicken with roasted potatoes. We made hamburgers every Wednesday and served them with sliced tomatoes and onions. The prep cooks prepared fresh greens, corn on the cob, coleslaw, and fresh pasta salad. A lot of time and care went into this labor. It was important to us to make good food since we were also eating it. For breakfast we had options, so if we didn't want the food served, we could choose from bowls of bran flakes or cornflakes with fresh fruit and milk.

Still, when Aramark won the food service contract for West Virginia prisons, we were excited about the potential for better food. That excitement was short-lived. They eliminated the fresh fruit and bowls of cereal, leaving us with no options other than what the kitchen put on the tray: runny scrambled

eggs; dehydrated potato slices that were either mushy or tough to chew; reheated pancakes made the previous day. The salad bar was removed. Fresh veggies were replaced with frozen ones.

At the same time, Aramark added for-profit food sales out of the dining room. They sold fresh veggie trays with tomatoes, green peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, and celery, along with slices of fruit pie, ice cream cups, and freshly made pizza bread with your choice of toppings. Purchasing it became the only way to get fresh food, as residents were no longer provided fresh veggies on the free trays served at meals. If you could not afford to buy them, you did not get them. A lot of the long timers, including myself, gave up their kitchen jobs due to pressure from the Aramark supervisors to work faster. When I left Lakin in 2021, the outside garden was gone, and the greenhouse was no longer in use.

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Eating in West Virginia Prisons

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) dietary guidelines advise that “a healthy diet focuses on consuming a variety of nutrient-dense foods including vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, nuts and seeds, and some dairy and meat products — prepared with little or no added solid fats, sugars, refined starches, and sodium.”¹

Of the 70 lunches and dinners, only 26 meals offer a salad option. One-third of those salad options aren't from fresh greens but potato salad, coleslaw, and pasta salad.

Yet a 2022 menu from a West Virginia prison shows few healthy options.² The menu lists the three daily meals to be served over a five-week period.

Nearly every meal includes bread or pasta. There is a rotation of sugary desserts, but no fruit. Of the 70 lunches and dinners, only 26 meals offer a salad option. One-third of those salad options aren't from fresh greens but potato salad, coleslaw, and pasta salad.

1. Leslie Soble, Kathryn Stroud, and Marika Weinstein, “Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison” (Oakland, CA: Impact Justice, 2020), 73, <https://impactjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/IJ-Eating-Behind-Bars.pdf> (accessed July 13, 2023); U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025” (9th Edition, December 2020), https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf.

2. Dining menu for Mt. Olive Correctional Center, effective April 1, 2022, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2022.04-Menu.pdf>.

Every few days, one can expect to eat biscuits and gravy for breakfast and hamburgers for lunch. Other recurring menu items include hot dogs, “Frito pie,” sloppy joes, and “meaty noodles.”

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5																																																																																																
Mon	B-Fast French Toast-Oatmeal-Pork Patty Lunch Meaty Noodles V1-B1-D1 Dinner CountryPatty M1-P2-V2-B1-D3	French Toast-Oatmeal-Pork Patty Grilled Ham & Chs S1-V1-S2-D3 Fish V5-B1-S1-D6	French Toast-Oatmeal-Pork Patty Roast Beef M1-P2-V5-B1-D3 Sloppy Joe B2-S6-D1 Ham P3-V8-S1-B1-D6	French Toast-Oatmeal-Pork Patty Sloppy Joe B2-S6-D1 Ham P3-V8-S1-B1-D6	French Toast-Oatmeal-Pork Patty Taco C3-V7-D3 Turkey Salad-S4-S1-B1-D1																																																																																																
Tue	B-Fast Eggs/Ham/Peppers&Onions, Grits Lunch Chicken Patty B1-C1-M2-V8-D6 Dinner Ham V1-V4-B1-D7	Eggs/Ham/Peppers&Onions, Grits Chicken Patty M1-M2-V8-B1-D6 Hearty/Spam/Rice V4-S1-B3-D7	Eggs/Ham/Peppers&Onions, Grits Fish M4-V9-B1-D5 BBQ Roast Beef P6-S2-B2-D7	Eggs/Ham/Peppers&Onions, Grits Turkey V1-C2-C3-S1-B1-D2 Chicken Thighs M1-M3-V5-S1-B3-D5	Eggs/Ham/Peppers&Onions, Grits Grilled Bologna w/Chs C3-B1-P9-D6 BBQ Patty M2-S1-B1-D3																																																																																																
Wed	B-Fast Gravy & Biscuits – M7 Lunch Hamburger C3-B2-C4-P1-D3 Dinner Cheesy Chicken Broccoli Rice V5-S1-B1-D6	Gravy & Biscuits – M7 Hamburger B2-C3-C4-P6-D3 Chili M3-V10-B3-D6	Gravy & Biscuits – M7 Hamburger C3-C4-P1-D6 Char Patty M2-V8-S1-D3	Gravy & Biscuits – M7 Hamburger C3-C4-P6-D6 Chili P5-V2-C5-C6-S1-D7	Gravy & Biscuits-M7 Hamburger B2-C2/C3/C4/P1-D3 Country Beef Patty M1-P2-V9-D6-B1																																																																																																
Thu	B-Fast Scrambled Eggs-Farina-D9 Lunch Roast Beef B1-P2-M1-D3 Dinner Char Patty M2-V2-S1-D5	Eggs-Farina-D9 Sloppy Joe B2-P5-S1-D3 Chicken Thighs M4-S1-B3-D6	Eggs-Farina-P9-D9 Peppered Fajita Meat V1-M9-D6 Cheesy Chicken Broccoli Rice V5-S2-B3-D3	Eggs-Farina-D9 Chicken Patty M1-M2-B1-D3 Meatballs M1-V1-V10-D6	Eggs-Farina-D9 Chicken Patty M1-M2-B1-D6 Spaghetti V8-S1-B1-D6																																																																																																
Fri	B-Fast Pancakes-Oatmeal-Sausage Lunch Fish B1-M4-V1-D3 Dinner Hamburger C3-B2-C4-P8-D6	Pancakes-Oatmeal-Sausage Frito Pie V1-M6-B3-D5 Hamburger B2-P1-D3-C3-C4	Pancakes-Oatmeal-Sausage Chicken Patty-B1-C1-S3-D3 Hamburger C2/C3-P8-D6	Pancakes-Oatmeal-Sausage Fish V11-B1-D4 Hamburger C2/C3-P1-D6	Pancakes-Oatmeal-Sausage Frito Pie V1-M6-B3-D4 Hamburger B2-C3-C4-P8-D3																																																																																																
Sat	B-Fast Eggs w/ Ham-Grits Lunch BBQ Turkey B1-P4-S2-D3 Dinner Chicken Thighs P2-M1-VW9-B3-D6	Eggs w/Ham-Grits BBQ Patty M2-V5-B1-D4 Turkey M8-M1-VW9-B3-D6	Eggs w/Ham-Grits Turkey Salad C2-B1-P7-D3 Pasta V8-S1-B1-D6	Eggs w/Ham – Grits Country Beef Patty M1-P6-B1-D3 Spaghetti V2-S1-B1-D5	Eggs w/Ham-Grits BBQ Turkey B1-S3-V3-D2 Fish M3-V2-B3-D3																																																																																																
Sun	B-Fast Gravy & Biscuits-M7-P9 Lunch Salisbury Steak M1-M3-B1-D4 Dinner Turkey Tetrazzini V9-V10-B3-D5	Gravy & Biscuits-M7: P9 Taco C3-V7-D3 Country Beef Patty P2-M1-S1-B1-D1	Gravy & Biscuits-M7-P9 Taco C3-M3-D3 Hot Dogs M5-S2-D3	Gravy & Biscuits-M7-P9 BBQ Patty M3-V10-B1-D10 Turkey/Dress P2-M1-V8-B1-D3	Gravy & Biscuits-M7-P9 Hot Dogs M5-D5 Meatballs M2-S1-B1-D3																																																																																																
<table><tr><th>Soup</th><th>Bread</th><th>Condiments</th><th>Deserts</th><th>Misc.</th><th>Potatoes</th><th>Salads</th><th>Vegetables</th></tr><tr><td>11/01/21</td><td>B1-Bread/Roll</td><td>C1-Mayo</td><td>D1-Lemon Square</td><td>M1-Gravy</td><td>P1-French Fries</td><td>S1-Salad</td><td>V1-Pinto Beans</td></tr><tr><td>Thru</td><td>B2-Hamburger Bun</td><td>C2-Let & Tomato</td><td>D2-Bread Pudding</td><td>M2-Noodles</td><td>P2-Mashed Potatoes</td><td>S2-Coleslaw</td><td>V2-Irish Beans</td></tr><tr><td>03/31/22</td><td>B3-Combread</td><td>C3-Cheese</td><td>D3-Cookie</td><td>M3-Rice</td><td>P3-Scalloped Potatoes</td><td>S3-Macaroni Salad</td><td>V3-Corn</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td>C4-Tomato & Onion</td><td>D4-Blueberry Oat Bar</td><td>M4-Mac & Cheese</td><td>P4-Au-gratin Potatoes</td><td>S4-Potato Salad</td><td>V4-Mixed Veg.</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td>C5-Sour Cream</td><td>D5-Brownie</td><td>M5-Coney Sauce</td><td>P5-Baked Potatoes</td><td>S5-Carrot Salad</td><td>V5-Green Beans</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td>C6-Cheese Sauce</td><td>D6-Cake</td><td>M6-Spanish Rice</td><td>P6-Cottage Fries</td><td>S6-Pasta Salad</td><td>V6-Broccoli</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>D7-Apple Spice Bar</td><td>M7-Bran Flakes</td><td>P7-Cajun Potatoes</td><td></td><td>V7-Re-fried Beans</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>D8-Cinnamon Cake</td><td>M8-Yellow Rice</td><td>P8-Oven Striped Potatoes</td><td></td><td>V8-Carrots</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>D9-Muffins</td><td>M9-Peppers & Onions</td><td>P9-Hash Brown Potatoes</td><td></td><td>V9-Peas</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>D10-Banana Cake</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>V10-Cabbage</td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>V11-Baked Beans</td></tr></table>						Soup	Bread	Condiments	Deserts	Misc.	Potatoes	Salads	Vegetables	11/01/21	B1-Bread/Roll	C1-Mayo	D1-Lemon Square	M1-Gravy	P1-French Fries	S1-Salad	V1-Pinto Beans	Thru	B2-Hamburger Bun	C2-Let & Tomato	D2-Bread Pudding	M2-Noodles	P2-Mashed Potatoes	S2-Coleslaw	V2-Irish Beans	03/31/22	B3-Combread	C3-Cheese	D3-Cookie	M3-Rice	P3-Scalloped Potatoes	S3-Macaroni Salad	V3-Corn			C4-Tomato & Onion	D4-Blueberry Oat Bar	M4-Mac & Cheese	P4-Au-gratin Potatoes	S4-Potato Salad	V4-Mixed Veg.			C5-Sour Cream	D5-Brownie	M5-Coney Sauce	P5-Baked Potatoes	S5-Carrot Salad	V5-Green Beans			C6-Cheese Sauce	D6-Cake	M6-Spanish Rice	P6-Cottage Fries	S6-Pasta Salad	V6-Broccoli				D7-Apple Spice Bar	M7-Bran Flakes	P7-Cajun Potatoes		V7-Re-fried Beans				D8-Cinnamon Cake	M8-Yellow Rice	P8-Oven Striped Potatoes		V8-Carrots				D9-Muffins	M9-Peppers & Onions	P9-Hash Brown Potatoes		V9-Peas				D10-Banana Cake				V10-Cabbage								V11-Baked Beans
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Source: Dining menu for Mt. Olive Correctional Center, effective April 1, 2022.

who had been incarcerated at Pruntytown Correctional Center and Jail, said the dining hall served “a lot of starches [and] processed foods,” but “serving sizes were too small.”³ A woman at Lakin remarked, “It was kind of like school lunch. I don’t remember getting fresh fruit or vegetables. Mostly it was starch.”⁴ Another formerly incarcerated woman said the food quality was “Garbage. Nothing healthy. Skimpy portions.”⁵ And correctional officers “would stand over you to make sure you would hurry and not share your food.”⁶

In 2022, a group of incarcerated people at Southern Regional Jail initiated a class-action lawsuit against the West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DCR) and others alleging unconstitutional conditions of confinement.⁷ The complaint included sworn affidavits from four correctional officers at the jail, who said that jail residents were “regularly served spoiled milk for breakfast,” “given inadequate portions of food,” and “commonly given what appeared to be undercooked or rotten meat.”⁸ Southern Regional Jail food service is provided by Aramark, the same vendor who serves food across all DCR facilities.

The menu does not show drink options, but when I was at Lakin, water was rarely served in the dining room. Instead, we were given grape or cherry-flavored water with our meals. We had access to filtered water and ice in our housing unit. But if we were on lockdown in our cell — which could happen a handful of times each month — we had to drink lukewarm water out of the sink.

What this menu does not show is the quality of the food that ends up on people’s plates. One man,

3. Teri Castle interview with Corey Nahodil, July 26, 2023.

4. Teri Castle interview with L.L., July 26, 2023 (interviewee’s initials are used to protect their privacy).

5. Teri Castle phone interview with Tia Simmons, July 28, 2023.

6. Teri Castle phone interview with Tia Simmons, July 28, 2023.

7. Michael D. Rose, et al., v. Jeff S. Sandy, et al., Civil Action No. 5:22-CV-00405, United States District Court, Southern District of West Virginia, Beckley Division.

8. Affidavit of Troy Carter, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Affidavit-of-Troy-Carter.pdf>; Affidavit of Anthony Marks, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Affidavit-of-Anthony-Marks.pdf>; Affidavit of Dean Vandevender, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Affidavit-of-Dean-Vandevender.pdf>; Affidavit of Scott Moore, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Affidavit-of-Scott-Moore.pdf>.

Just this year, DCR's commissioner testified to a legislative committee about the poor-quality food being served in DCR facilities housing children: "We have dealt with a number of different requests and different problems that we took on once we entered into our new contract. But since then, I think things have greatly improved. We are very aggressive when something is to come up whether they end up with bad lettuce or bad bread or whatever we make sure that's corrected immediately. And so, we've seen where the problems have been so we're making sure the kids are fed properly and fed what they what they deserve to get. We don't want any of them to not have what they need."⁹

But too often, people behind bars are not getting the quality and quantity of fresh food they need. **Today, there are 1,500 more adults in West Virginia prisons than there were two decades ago.**¹⁰

In the era of mass incarceration, West Virginia and other states face a growing food bill, "leading to nationwide patterns of unacceptable and declining food quality" in prisons.¹¹



1,500
MORE ADULTS IN WEST VIRGINIA PRISONS

A recent report describes that the experience of people in prisons in West Virginia is mirrored around the country: **"[F]ewer hot meals, smaller portions, lower-quality protein, and more ultra-processed foods that can be quickly heated and served; along with poorly equipped and ill-supervised kitchens that further compromise food quality and safety. Fresh fruits and vegetables — central to a healthy diet rich in nutrients and fiber — are exceedingly rare in prison. Most prisons now rely on refined carbohydrates (e.g., white bread, biscuits, and cake) to reach the mandated calorie count, and many have turned to fortified powdered beverage mixes as the primary source of essential nutrients — a cheap but woefully inadequate alternative to nutrient-dense whole foods."**¹²

Privatized Prison Food: A Failed Experiment

The story of bad prison food is incomplete without understanding a little-known aspect of government: purchasing. Every year, West Virginia agencies pay private companies millions of dollars to provide goods and services. Also called procurement, purchasing describes the bid and contract process that governs the flow of state dollars to private companies.

9. William Marshall testimony to West Virginia Legislative Oversight Committee on Regional Jail and Correctional Facility Authority, April 16, 2023, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DB_DeZvDw4, minutes 10:21-10:54 (accessed July 11, 2023).

10. "Annual Report FY 2002" (Charleston, WV: West Virginia Division of Corrections), 113, https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/Documents/annual_reports/AR2002.pdf (accessed August 3, 2022); "West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation Adult Inmate Count, Run Date 7/5/2023" (Charleston, WV: Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation).

11. Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein, "Eating Behind Bars," 7.

12. Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein, "Eating Behind Bars," 8.

In West Virginia, procurement is handled by the Purchasing Division of the Department of Administration, whose mission is “to provide prudent and fair spending practices in procuring quality goods and services at the lowest cost to state taxpayers by maximizing efficiencies and offering guidance to our customers.”¹³

But what happens when the needs of a growing prison population come up against a procurement approach that prioritizes the “lowest cost”? State government officials start choosing private companies.

The food service vendor for West Virginia prisons is Pennsylvania-based Aramark Correctional Services. The multi-billion-dollar company has benefited from the increasing privatization of mass incarceration, operating in hundreds of jails and prisons across the country “despite repeated fines over scandals including serving food tainted by maggots and rats.”¹⁴

One woman who worked for decades as a corrections officer in New Jersey described how Aramark reduced the quality of food in her prison: “The bread was stale. I saw food in the kitchen with mold on it. The refrigerator broke down and the food was left outside in the cold or trucked in from another facility. Those who ate the food began to get sick.”¹⁵ Ohio officials levied fines against Aramark for food shortages and sanitation violations.¹⁶ In one Colorado jail, Aramark served food that contained the metal shavings of a broken kitchen machine.¹⁷ Corrections officials in Kentucky attributed a 2009 prison riot to grievances over Aramark-provided meals.¹⁸

We spoke with one man who was in West Virginia prisons before and after Aramark took over food service. Before Aramark, “we had better portions. We had fruit once a week. Blueberry pancakes, real eggs, sausage links, and real chicken occasionally.”¹⁹ After Aramark, “The portion shrank. We didn’t have fruit. Rarely had a real egg. I remember we had pancakes, but they were not fresh, and they did not have fruit in them. We would have chicken patties that were 90% breading. No real chicken in them. We got frozen vegetables like peas.”²⁰

13. W.Va. Code § 5A-3; West Virginia Purchasing Division, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.state.wv.us/admin/purchase/>.

14. David Reutter, “Prison Food and Commissary Services: A Recipe for Disaster,” Prison Legal News, August 4, 2018, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2018/aug/4/prison-food-and-commissary-services-recipe-disaster/>; Rupert Neate, “Prison Food Politics: The Economics of an Industry Feeding 2.2 Million,” The Guardian, September 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/30/prison-food-spending-budget-cuts-minnesota>.

15. Chris Hedges, “Food Behind Bars Isn’t Fit For Your Dog,” TruthDig.com, December 23, 2013, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/food-behind-bars-isnt-fit-for-your-dog/>.

16. Associated Press, “Ohio Decides to Renew Prison Food Contract with Aramark,” Toledo Blade, June 23, 2015, <https://www.toledoblade.com/news/state/2015/06/23/Ohio-decides-to-renew-prison-food-contract-with-Aramark/stories/20150623206>.

17. Conrad Swanson, “Aramark, Which Has Served Rotten Food in Other States, Could Win \$9M Denver Jail Contract,” The Denver Post, June 24, 2021, <https://www.denverpost.com/2021/06/24/denver-jail-aramark-food-contract/>.

18. David M. Reutter, “Food Problems Contribute to Riot at Kentucky Prison,” Prison Legal News, April 15, 2010, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2010/apr/15/food-problems-contribute-to-riot-at-kentucky-prison/>.

19. Teri Castle phone interview with Clinton Simmons, July 28, 2023.

20. Teri Castle phone interview with Clinton Simmons, July 28, 2023.

These problems are not unique to Aramark. A competitor food service company, Trinity Services Group, has been dogged by similar accusations of rotten food, retaliation against staff, and conflicts of interest in commissary sales.²¹

Over the last decade, the state of Michigan learned this lesson at the expense of people living and working inside its prisons.

In 2013

\$145 Million Dollars

CONTRACT WITH ARAMARK

370 Union Employees

REPLACED WITH ARAMARK WORKERS

\$11-\$13 per hour

REDUCED WAGES FOR NEW WORKERS

In 2013, their Department of Corrections began a privatization experiment with prison food. That year, the state signed a three-year, \$145 million contract with Aramark with the goal of reducing prison operating costs.²² The 370 union employees who had earned \$15-25 per hour working in prison kitchens were replaced with Aramark workers earning \$11-13 per hour.²³

Within the first year of the contract, Aramark employees were accused of smuggling drugs into the prison, having sexual relationships with residents, and in one case, attempting to hire one resident to kill another resident.²⁴

During the same period, the state levied thousands of dollars in fines against Aramark for food shortages, unauthorized menu substitutions, and sanitation issues.²⁵ Residents were served food with maggots,²⁶ rotten meat,²⁷ cake eaten by rodents,²⁸ and food that had been taken out of the trash.²⁹ Residents in multiple prisons staged demonstrations throughout 2014 to protest the quality of food.³⁰

21. Paul Egan, "Prison Food Worker: 'I Was Fired for Refusing to Serve Rotten Potatoes,'" Detroit Free Press, August 25, 2017, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2017/08/25/prison-trinity-kinross-fired-rotten-potatoes/596849001/>; Reutter, "Prison Food and Commissary Services."

22. Tom Perkins, "Michigan's Failed Effort to Privatize Prison Kitchens and the Future of Institutional Food," Civil Eats, August 20, 2018, <https://civileats.com/2018/08/20/michigans-failed-effort-to-privatize-prison-kitchens-and-the-future-of-institutional-food/>.

23. Perkins, "Michigan's Failed Effort to Privatize Prison Kitchens"; Paul Egan, "Michigan to End Prison Food Deal with Aramark," Detroit Free Press, July 13, 2015, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/07/13/state-ends-prison-food-contract-aramark/30080211/>.

24. Paul Egan, "Aramark Prison Worker Suspected in Attempted Hired Hit," Detroit Free Press, September 25, 2014, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2014/09/25/aramark-worker-investigated-murder-hire-plot/16172713/>.

25. Paul Egan, "More Maggots Found in Food in Aramark Prison Kitchen," Detroit Free Press, June 2, 2015, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/06/02/aramark-michigan-prison-contractor-maggots-kitchen/28378435/>; Brian Smith, "Aramark Fined \$200,000 by Gov. Rick Snyder for Prison Food Problems," MLive.com, August 8, 2014, https://www.mlive.com/lansing-news/2014/08/aramark_fine_snyder.html.

26. Tim Requarth, "How Private Equity Is Turning Public Prisons into Big Profits," The Nation, April 30, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/prison-privatization-private-equity-hig/>.

27. Tom Perkins, "Something Still Stinks in Michigan and Ohio's Prison Kitchens," Detroit Metro Times, February 17, 2016, <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/something-still-stinks-in-michigan-and-ohios-prison-kitchens-2396672>.

28. Kyle Feldscher, "Aramark Worker Ordered Prisoner to Feed Inmates at Michigan Prison Cake Partially Eaten by Rodents," MLive.com, March 17, 2015, https://www.mlive.com/lansing-news/2015/03/inmates_at_mid-michigan_prison.html.

29. Bob Johnson, "Food in Trash Served to State Prisoners in Saginaw County; Aramark Worker Fired," MLive.com, March 30, 2015, https://www.mlive.com/news/saginaw/2015/03/aramark_employee_served_sagina.html.

30. Paul Egan, "Prisoners in Marquette Demonstrate Over Aramark Food," Detroit Free Press, November 12, 2014, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2014/11/12/prisoners-marquette-protest-aramark-food/18933107/>.

Michigan's then-Senate Majority Leader declared, "The Aramark contract has been a nightmare from day one. This completely irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars has put hundreds of state kitchen employees out of work and... jeopardized the health and safety of inmates and prison employees alike."³¹ After a year-long campaign by the public to get Aramark out of Michigan prisons, the state ended its contract early in 2015.³²

But the state jumped to another private vendor, signing a three-year, \$158 million contract with Trinity Services Group.³³ Trinity promptly rehired the same kitchen workers once employed by Aramark, and the food problems continued.³⁴ A year later, one prison resident described why fellow residents were skipping meals and going hungry: "Somehow, the food got worse. Whatever they cook, no matter what it is, it's always worse."³⁵ In March 2016, all but 30 of the 1,300 residents of one facility skipped meals in a silent protest.³⁶ After months of peaceful protest, frustrations over food service culminated in the first riot in a Michigan prison since 1981, which caused nearly \$1 million in damage.³⁷



1,270
of the
1,300

RESIDENTS SKIPPED MEALS
IN A SILENT PROTEST.

“With the services provided and where the costs were going, it didn’t make sense. We can do it smarter and better. Getting back to bids would probably cost more than what we’d pay ourselves, so why not do it ourselves?”

When the state decided to end its Trinity contract in 2018, the director of Michigan's Department of Corrections announced, "We believe the department's needs would be better met by returning to state-run food service."³⁸ As Michigan Governor Rick Snyder explained: "With the services provided and where the costs were going, it didn't make sense. We can do it smarter and better. Getting back to bids would probably cost

more than what we'd pay ourselves, so why not do it ourselves?"³⁹ After Michigan returned to state-run prison kitchens, prisons saw fewer staff shortages, higher sanitation scores, and dramatically fewer meal delays.⁴⁰

31. Egan, "Michigan to End Deal with Aramark."

32. Egan, "Michigan to End Deal with Aramark."

33. Colleen Curry, "Michigan is Booting Aramark from Its Prisons, but Not Over Rat-and-Maggot Tainted Food," Vice News, July 14, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ev9n7m/michigan-is-booting-aramark-from-its-prisons-but-not-over-rat-and-maggot-tainted-food>.

34. Tom Perkins, "Why 1,200 Michigan Inmates are Protesting Their Prison's Food," Vice News, March 25, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gkvn8w/why-1200-michigan-inmates-are-protesting-their-prisons-food>.

35. Perkins, "Something Still Stinks in Prison Kitchens."

36. Paul Egan, "Prisoners Protest Food Under New Contractor Trinity," Detroit Free Press, March 22, 2016, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/03/22/prisoners-protest-food-under-new-contractor-trinity/82120158/>.

37. Paul Egan, "Riot or Reined-in? Prison Officials Disagree on U.P. Skirmish," Detroit Free Press, September 20, 2016, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/09/20/disturbance-kinross-prison-riot/90742082/>; Requarth, "Private Equity Turning Public Prisons into Big Profits."

38. Karen Bota, "MDOC, Trinity Services Group 'Mutually Agree' to End Contract," Ionia Sentinel-Standard, February 7, 2018, <https://www.sentinel-standard.com/story/news/local/2018/02/07/mdoc-trinity-services-group-mutually/15294653007/>.

39. Bota, "MDOC, Trinity Services to End Contract."

40. Paul Egan, "Problem-Plagued Prison Kitchens Better After Private Contracts End, Officials Say," Detroit Free Press, May 23, 2019, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/05/23/michigan-prison-food-end-privatization/3765317002/>.

Michigan learned that privatization does not work because quality food is not the goal in a for-profit service incentivized to provide worse or less food.

For-Profit Prison Food Is a Public Health Problem

For-profit food service contributes to the life-shortening impact of prison. People in prisons suffer much higher rates of chronic physical conditions and infectious disease than the general population.⁴¹ Incarceration is also associated with a 45 percent increase in the chance of lifetime major depression.⁴² Further, prison takes years off one's life. A study of New York parole data found that each additional year behind bars translated to a two-year decline in life expectancy for people on parole.⁴³ One study found that the life-shortening effects of prison also impacted the population as a whole, concluding that between 1981 and 2007, "the United States missed out on 1.79 years of total life expectancy gains as a result of increases in incarceration over this period."⁴⁴

A 2016 Bureau of Justice Statistics report found people behind bars "suffer from higher rates of diabetes and heart disease than the general public, conditions caused or at minimum exacerbated by the typical prison diet."

Food impacts both physical and mental health. Eating "just one month of unhealthy meals can result in long-term rises in cholesterol and body fat, increasing the risk of diet-related diseases."⁴⁵ A 2016 Bureau of Justice Statistics report found people behind bars "suffer from higher rates of diabetes and heart disease than the general public, conditions caused or at minimum exacerbated by the typical prison diet."⁴⁶

One woman who had been incarcerated at Lakin recalled how food affected her health: "I gained a lot of weight in prison, which caused me to struggle with high blood pressure."⁴⁷ Although she required blood pressure medication during her incarceration, her blood pressure returned to healthy levels after she left prison.⁴⁸ A man serving a sentence at Mt. Olive Correctional Center observed that his prison had "a lot of diabetics, because most of what the kitchen feeds us is pasta and rice."⁴⁹

41. Leah Wang, "Chronic Punishment: The Unmet Health Needs of People in State Prisons" (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, June 2022), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/chronicpunishment.html> (accessed October 5, 2022).

42. Jason Schnittker, Michael Massoglia, and Christopher Uggen, "Out and Down: Incarceration and Psychiatric Disorders," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 53, no. 4 (2012): 459, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146512453928> (accessed October 3, 2022); Timothy G. Edgemon and Jody Clay-Warner, "Inmate Mental Health and the Pains of Imprisonment," *Society and Mental Health* 9, no. 1 (2019): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869318785424> (accessed October 3, 2022).

43. Evelyn J. Patterson, "The Dose-Response of Time Served in Prison on Mortality: New York State, 1989-2003" *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 3 (March 2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.301148> (accessed July 27, 2022).

44. Christopher Wildeman, "Incarceration and Population Health in Wealthy Democracies," *Criminology* 54, no. 2 (2016): 374, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12107> (accessed July 26, 2022).

45. Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein, "Eating Behind Bars," 37.

46. Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein, "Eating Behind Bars," 9.

47. Teri Castle phone interview with Tia Simmons, July 28, 2023.

48. Teri Castle phone interview with Tia Simmons, July 28, 2023.

49. Sara Whitaker interview with Phillip Ward, August 25, 2022.

Sodium-filled, processed diets are particularly harmful for Black and older prison residents — two groups of people disproportionately represented in West Virginia prisons.⁵⁰ Although Black West Virginians comprise 3.7 percent of the state's population, Black people make up 12.1 percent of the prison population — making them more than three times as likely to be incarcerated.⁵¹ Older people make up a growing share of West Virginia prisons. In 2002, there were 445 people who were 50 or older living in West Virginia prisons.⁵² Last year, there were 1,209 people — or one out every four residents — age 50 or older.⁵³

Because of the limited choices available, prison food can worsen existing medical conditions.⁵⁴ A man who had been prescribed a medical diet for kidney disease by the prison medical provider found that the dining service would not accommodate his medical needs. When he inquired to learn more, a kitchen worker told him, “I got nothing to do with that.”⁵⁵ Our state has paid the price. In the last two decades, prison medical expenditures more than doubled, from \$10.2 million per year to \$22.7 million.⁵⁶



PRISON MEDICAL EXPENDITURES
MORE THAN DOUBLED TO

\$22.7 Million Dollars

IN THE LAST DECADE

In addition to poor physical health, “nutrient deficiencies contribute to a wide range of mental health and behavioral issues, including depression, aggression, and antisocial behavior,”⁵⁷ which is why healthier food may also increase safety within a facility. In Michigan, bad food led to protests and a riot. The American Bar Association Standards on Treatment of Prisoners states that “bad or insufficient food is a flashpoint for conflict in prisons and jails; complaints about inadequate food have historically been a common cause of prison disturbances. Serving ample portions of decent and healthy food three times a day not only helps [residents] but keeps tensions lower in correctional facilities.”⁵⁸

Studies conducted in European prisons confirm this. Over the last two decades, studies have found that increasing vitamins, minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids reduced violence and rule violations by 30 percent.⁵⁹ Safer, more orderly workplaces are more attractive places to work.

50. Prison Voice Washington, “Correcting Food Policy in Washington Prisons,” October 25, 2016, https://washingtoncorrectionswatch.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/final_correcting-food-policy-in-wa-prisons_prison-voice-wa.pdf (accessed July 12, 2023).

51. “FY 2022 Annual Report WV Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation” (Charleston, WV: West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation, December 2022), 37, https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/Documents/annual_reports/FY22%20ANNUAL%20REPORT%20WVDCR.pdf (accessed January 25, 2023).

52. DCR, “Annual Report FY 2002,” 119.

53. DCR, “FY 2022 Annual Report,” 37.

54. “The High Costs of Low Risk: The Crisis of America’s Aging Population,” The Osborne Association, 23, May 2018, https://www.osborneny.org/assets/files/Osborne_HighCostsofLowRisk.pdf (accessed July 21, 2023).

55. Sara Whitaker phone interview with Darrin Lester, September 7, 2022.

56. DCR, “Annual Report FY 2002,” 20; DCR, “FY 2022 Annual Report,” 28.

57. Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein, “Eating Behind Bars,” 9; Barbara J. Meyer et al., “Baseline Omega-3 Index Correlates with Aggressive and Attention Deficit Disorder Behaviours in Adult Prisons,” *PLoS One* 10, 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0120220> (accessed July 12, 2023).

58. American Bar Association, *ABA Standards for Criminal Justice: Treatment of Prisoners* (Third Edition, 2011), 83, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/criminal_justice_standards/treatment_of_prisoners.pdf.

59. C. Bernard Gesch et al., “Influence of Supplementary Vitamins, Minerals and Essential Fatty Acids on the Antisocial Behavior of Young Adult Prisoners: Randomised, Placebo-Controlled Trial,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 181, 1 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.181.1.22>; Ap Zaalberg et al., “Effects of Nutritional Supplements on Aggression, Rule-breaking, and Psychopathology Among Young Adult Prisoners,” *Aggressive Behavior* 36, 2 (March/April 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20335>; Stephen Schoenthaler et al., “The Effects of Vitamin-Mineral Supplements on Serious Rule Violations in Correctional Facilities for Young Adult Male Inmates: A Randomized Controlled Trial,” *Crime & Delinquency* 69, 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/001128721989073>.

At a time when DCR staff vacancy rates remain stuck at 30 percent, improving the quality of food behind bars makes good HR policy.⁶⁰

Safer, more orderly workplaces are more attractive places to work. At a time when DCR staff vacancy rates remain stuck at 30 percent, improving the quality of food behind bars makes good HR policy.

Health conditions developed in prisons come home to our communities. Ninety-five percent of people in prison are eventually released, with roughly 3,200 leaving West Virginia prisons every year.⁶¹ Our state has an interest in keeping people behind bars healthy and strong so that they will return home to our communities with a fighting chance to thrive and succeed.

For-Profit Prison Food Sends Millions of Dollars Out of West Virginia

Since 2015, West Virginia prisons have sent more than \$57.1 million out of state to pay for food served in its prisons.⁶² In 2018, the legislature consolidated West Virginia's prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities into a single agency, the DCR.⁶³ Buried in the 85 pages of legislation were provisions that exempted the newly consolidated DCR from the procedures of the Purchasing Division.⁶⁴ The independent state agency tasked with ensuring fair and transparent bidding was no longer involved. When purchasing goods and services for its dozens of facilities across the state, DCR was now in charge.

The lack of transparency became apparent in the research for this report. Unlike the Purchasing Division, which puts all state contracts overseen by the divisions on its website, DCR contracts are not available online.⁶⁵ A May 2023 Freedom of Information Act request to DCR for its food vendor contracts remained unanswered as of August 2023.⁶⁶

When the public cannot easily access DCR contracts, it becomes easier for the agency to hide conflicts of interests. In 2022, DCR signed a five-year contract with Union Supply Group (USG) to provide commissary services.⁶⁷ USG sells everything from reading glasses and underwear to candy bars and instant meals — often at above-market prices.⁶⁸

60. Jeff Jenkins, "'Excellent' Meetings Could Lead to Proposal Addressing Worker Vacancy Rate in State's Jails and Prisons," MetroNews, July 9, 2023, <https://wvmetronews.com/2023/07/09/excellent-meetings-could-lead-to-proposal-to-address-worker-vacancy-rate-in-states-jails-and-prisons/>.

61. WVCBP analysis of five years of release data provided by DCR annual reports for Fiscal Years 2018-2023.

62. WVCBP analysis of prison food expenditures provided by DCR annual reports for Fiscal Years 2015-2023.

63. H.B. 4338, 2018 Leg., Reg. Sess. (W.Va. 2018).

64. West Virginia Code § 15A-3-14.

65. "Transparency," West Virginia Purchasing Division, <https://www.state.wv.us/admin/purchase/transparency.html> (accessed July 13, 2023).

66. Sara Whitaker, "FOIA Request," emailed to William Marshall, May 15, 2023.

67. State of West Virginia Agency Master Agreement, Union Supply Group: Commissary Services, Order Date January 27, 2022, available here: <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2022-United-Supply-Group-Master-Agreement.pdf>.

68. USG, West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation: Cost Reply, available here: <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/USG-Cost-Reply-Menu.pdf>.

Commissary (also called “canteen”) is like the company store: simultaneously a relief and a burden. Commissary provides incarcerated people with necessary items the state does not provide, but at a high price. An incarcerated man who worked in an Aramark kitchen in a New Jersey jail explained, “The portions we were required to serve were really small. You could eat six portions like the ones we served... and still be hungry. If we put more than the required portion on the tray the Aramark people would make us take it off. It wasn’t civilized... The only way a person survived in there was to have money on the books to order from the canteen.”⁶⁹

With most prison labor paying less than \$1.50 an hour,⁷⁰ the financial burden of keeping “money on the books” falls on a person’s loved ones outside of prison.⁷¹ A woman who had been incarcerated at Lakin spent 75 percent of the money her family sent her on commissary food.⁷²


MOST PRISON LABOR PAYS LESS THAN
\$1.50
AN HOUR

The USG commissary agreement with DCR reveals two moral hazards in the privatization of West Virginia’s prison food services.

DCR Earns \$\$\$



First, under the contract, USG pays DCR a commission on sales made to residents. DCR gets a 10 percent kick-back for adult prison sales, and 20 percent for sales made in jails or juvenile facilities. **So, when USG makes money selling items that DCR does not provide, DCR also makes money. In other words, DCR has a direct financial incentive to leave residents underserved.**

Second, in June 2022, Aramark acquired USG.⁷³ A few months after the acquisition, Aramark announced “the highest annual revenue” in the company’s history.⁷⁴ When people in prison eat meals in the dining hall, Aramark makes money. When people in prison supplement those meals with other food, Aramark makes money.

69. Hedges, “Food Behind Bars Isn’t Fit For Your Dog.”

70. West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Policy Directive 500.00: Work Assignment Program, Effective July 1, 2022, available here: <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/DCR-Policy-500.00-Work-Assignment-Program.pdf>.

71. Saneta deVuono-powell et al., Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families (Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, Research Action Design, 2015), <https://www.whopaysreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Who-Pays-FINAL.pdf> (accessed September 22, 2015).

72. Teri Castle interview with L.L., July 26, 2023.

73. Aramark, “Aramark Reports First Quarter Earnings,” February 7, 2023, <https://aramark.gcs-web.com/static-files/c4affbf9-afac-48c4-b70e-ca59c7e18b9a>.

74. Aramark, “Aramark Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year Fiscal 2022 Results,” November 15, 2022, <https://aramark.gcs-web.com/static-files/2df382eb-0a55-4b5f-a5b4-7775475b0a22>.

Solutions

When we asked people who have eaten West Virginia prison food what they wanted, one formerly-incarcerated man urged, “Get rid of Aramark! All they care about is money.”⁷⁵ But Michigan’s experiment with privatized prison food taught us that the problem is bigger than

any one vendor. To ensure that people behind bars receive the nutrition they need, West Virginia prisons must change the way they buy and monitor goods and services.

Ongoing Oversight by the People Who Know Best

Whether food service is outsourced to vendors or handled by state employees, prisons residents and experts should be invited to provide ongoing oversight. Here are some ideas about how DCR can meet its duty to provide healthy, nourishing food.

- Establish a food oversight committee in each facility that includes representatives from the prison population, kitchen supervisors, a nutritionist, and ex-residents. This committee should meet regularly to discuss the food that is being served, address any concerns or complaints, and make quarterly recommendations to the DCR.
- Require the food service provider to take a photograph of the food served on a daily basis, with a resident holding their tray in the picture to show portion sizes – and log those photographs on a publicly available server or social media site.
- Quick resolution of grievances: Residents should be able to have problems with spoiled milk or food and incorrect portion sizes resolved on the spot.
- Regular, unannounced spot checks with a certified nutritionist should be done to assess the nutritional value, quality, and variety of the meals being served.

Better Value Purchasing

It starts with purchasing. When the legislature made DCR exempt from the oversight of the Purchasing Division, the legislature directed that on any contracts worth \$25,000 or more, DCR “shall make a written contract with the lowest responsible bidder.”⁷⁶ Later legislation gave DCR the flexibility to depart from lowest bid purchasing. Under the Commissioner’s discretion, the agency may use “best value procurement” to select vendors based on factors other than price, such as quality.⁷⁷

Traditional government purchasing views goods and services in silos. There is a budget for food. There is a budget for medical care. A best value approach, however, requires government spenders to consider multiple goals at once, recognizing that the lowest bidder may ultimately be the more expensive choice. If we spent a little more on food, we could spend a little less on medical care.

Transparency is critical. DCR should make its requests for proposals and contracts public and easily accessible. The agency should invite public comment from incarcerated people and the people who use the goods and services — either directly or indirectly by providing financial support. By giving the public more information — and seeking out more as

75. Teri Castle phone interview with Clinton Simmons, July 28, 2023.

76. Enrolled Committee Substitute for H.B. 4338, 2018 Leg., Reg. Sess. (W.Va. 2018), available here: <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/DCR-Consolidation-HB-4338-2018.pdf>.

77. W.Va. Code § 15A-3-14(c).

well — DCR can make better-informed decisions. Perhaps DCR will make the same decision as Michigan and Minnesota, who brought their food services in-house and saw quality improve.⁷⁸ DCR can take the first step towards transparency by publishing all of its vendor contracts — current and historical — online.

Equally important is what DCR prioritizes in its purchasing.

When it comes to food service, health must be at the top of the list.

People who have eaten West Virginia prison food know how to make meals healthier. One person suggested, “Get rid of fake meat and serve less noodles.”⁷⁹ Another recommended “more fruits and healthier options, like salads.”⁸⁰ Another person declared, “If I was in charge of the food and the Division of Corrections, the first thing I would do is put in a salad bar with fresh veggies, spinach, and seasonal fruit...I would serve fish without all the heavy breading and real boiled eggs.”⁸¹

In 2019, West Virginia lawmakers agreed. The Fresh Food Act directed all state-funded institutions to purchase a minimum of five percent of its fresh produce, meat, and poultry from West Virginia producers.⁸² The legislature found that shortening the distance between where food is grown and where it is consumed led to healthier food, a healthier environment, and a healthier economy.

“... We have done everything we can, but those agencies are just buying the cheapest thing they can.”

But in 2022, the Department of Agriculture Commissioner spoke publicly about the lack of compliance amongst state agencies. “I was given enforcement authority but no tools to do it. There is no penalty if they don’t. They are required to report to the Department of Agriculture, but they don’t do it... We have done everything we can, but those agencies are just buying the cheapest thing they can.”⁸³

We are left to conclude that DCR is one of those agencies buying the cheapest food they can. Under the Fresh Food Act, all state agencies must provide the Department of Agriculture with copies of its food-related vendor contracts, as well as annual reports describing the breakdown of foods purchased in and out of West Virginia.⁸⁴ According to the Department of Agriculture, as of August 9, 2023, DCR has failed to submit any documentation required by the Fresh Food Act since 2019.⁸⁵

78. Neate, “Prison Food Politics”; “Menus and Nutrition,” Minnesota Department of Corrections, <https://mn.gov/doc/about/menus-and-nutrition/> (accessed August 3, 2023).

79. Teri Castle interview with Corey Nahodil, July 26, 2023.

80. Teri Castle interview with L.L., July 26, 2023.

81. Teri Castle phone interview with Tia Simmons, July 28, 2023.

82. Fresh Food Act, H.B. 2396, 2019 Leg., Reg. Sess. (W.Va. 2019), available here: <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Fresh-Food-Act-HB-2396-2019.pdf>.

83. Autumn Shelton, “W.Va. AG Secretary Warns of Threatened Food Supply,” The Register-Herald, July 22, 2022, https://www.register-herald.com/news/state_region/w-va-ag-secretary-warns-of-threatened-food-supply/article_90b13cb5-a923-5cb0-9132-18e1c49ec7cf.html.

84. West Virginia Legislative Rule §61-10-1 (“Fresh Food Act”), <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Fresh-Food-Act-Administrative-Rules.pdf>.

85. Sara Whitaker email correspondence with Department of Agriculture, August 9, 2023.



Story Spotlight Teri's Return Home

I had gained 50 pounds during my time in prison. I was struggling with chronic constipation, high blood pressure, and hemorrhoids. I was taking a blood pressure pill and a laxative every day. After years of excessive pain and bleeding from those hemorrhoids, they were surgically removed. When I came home at the age of 52, I was diagnosed with pre-diabetes. I was prescribed a weight-loss drug and advised by my doctor to change my diet and exercise daily.

I am committed to daily walking and swimming as well as mindful food choices. Oatmeal with banana and fresh blueberries, salads with onion, peppers, and tomatoes, grilled chicken

with lemons, and my new favorite — spinach! I drink iced water and avoid Kool-Aid and pop. I have healthy snacks like cottage cheese with peaches, homemade fruit smoothies, and fresh fruits. I have lost 40 pounds and reversed my pre-diabetes. I no longer need laxatives or blood pressure pills. My overall health has greatly improved. I now feel energetic and happy instead of being weighed down.

People who are still in prison don't have options to change their food or exercise routine. They can only eat, drink, and exercise at the leave of the prison they are in.



But it does not have to be this way.

The increasing privatization of public prisons has been facilitated, in part, by mass incarceration.

For every 100,000 West Virginians, our state imprisons 613 people at an annual cost greater than most West Virginians earn in a year's work.⁸⁶ Our state has an incarceration rate higher than any country in the world.⁸⁷ The more people we incarcerate, the more vulnerable West Virginia is to profit-seeking vendors willing to sacrifice quality. We can send fewer people to prison. We can send more people home.

86. "Appendix I: State Data States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2021," The Prison Policy Initiative, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/appendix_states_2021.html (accessed October 25, 2022) (rate of incarceration based on the number of people incarcerated in state prisons and jails).

87. "West Virginia Profile," Prison Policy Initiative, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/WV.html> (accessed September 23, 2022); Emily Widra and Tiana Herring, "States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2021," Prison Policy Initiative, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html> (accessed September 23, 2022).

Authors

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Authors' note: all sections of this report written in the first person were authored by Ms. Castle. The remaining sections were written by Ms. Castle and Ms. Whitaker in collaboration.