

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 26, 2024

The Honorable Colette S. Peters
Director
Federal Bureau of Prisons
320 First St., NW
Washington, DC 20534

Dear Director Peters,

We write to you regarding the inclusion of plant-based dining options within the Federal Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) Food Service operations. We commend the BOP's Food Service Manual for requiring a "no-flesh" (meatless) protein option at both noon and evening meals.¹ Still, further action to support plant-based dining options could improve inmate health, lower dining costs, and better meet the diverse dietary needs of inmates. For example, we would be interested to see the Food Service Manual address providing meatless meal options at breakfast and to see further action taken to ensure that healthier vegetarian options currently on BOP's national menu are consistently available for prisoners across facilities. We would also support having the Manual encourage prisons to use plant-based proteins and set requirements for federal prisons to meet religious dietary requirements.

Many states, including California, New York, and Maryland have considered or adopted legislation that requires or encourages prisons and other public facilities to take the steps above.^{2,3,4} In order to determine how Congress can best support BOP in taking these steps forward, we are requesting further information.

Expanding access to plant-based options is a pathway to better health outcomes for inmates. As you know, federal prisons house inmates who suffer from chronic and diet-related health conditions at or above the rates among age-, race-, and sex-matched populations within the general public. However, inmates have far lower access to both preventive lifestyle measures and pharmacological treatments while in prison, which together contribute to excess mortality from nearly all major causes of death in the years following their release. A 2016 survey estimated that 33% of federal prisoners reported currently having a chronic health condition.⁵ Consuming meals focused on plant-based foods offers nutritional and health benefits, as they contain less saturated fat and sodium than animal products, are higher in dietary fiber, and do not contribute

¹ Federal Bureau of Prisons. "Food Service Manual." <https://www.bop.gov/policy/progstat/4700.07.pdf>

² Khalife, Gabrielle. "California Passes Law Requiring Vegan Meals in Prisons and Hospitals." <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/california-passes-law-requiring-vegan-meals-in-prisons-and-hospitals/>

³ Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "Maryland Legislation Would Mandate Plant-Based Options in Hospitals, Prisons." <https://www.pcrm.org/news/news-releases/maryland-legislation-would-mandate-plant-based-options-hospitals-prisons>

⁴ Morris, Lindsay. "New York Moves to Guarantee Plant-Based Options at Hospitals Statewide." <https://www.forksoverknives.com/wellness/new-york-passes-plant-based-hospitals-bill-vegan-meals/>

⁵ Maruschak, Laura and Bronson, Jennifer. "Medical Problems Reported by Prisoners." <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/mprpspi16st.pdf>

to non-communicable diseases like heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Plant-based meals also are a nutritious option for individuals who adhere to vegan, vegetarian, Halal, and Kosher diets.

Offering plant-based meals can also be a cost-effective option for prisons to provide nutritious food to patients. Much of the most forward-thinking innovation demonstrating cost savings comes from the healthcare sector. For example, an analysis prepared for a health care network with data based on a hospital with 350 beds and 5,000 staff members concluded that offering plant-based defaults would reduce food-related costs for patients by \$0.74 per meal over a 6-month pilot and \$0.65 per meal over a 5-year program.⁶ Most of the pilot/program savings came from lower food ingredient costs. While this calculation reflects the direct savings to the hospital's food program, it does not include more savings that in the context of a prison could relate to health improvements, behavioral incident reduction, less need for costly healthcare interventions, etc. Furthermore, the New York Health + Hospital system has adopted a plant-based default dining approach. Under this system, patients are served a plant-based dining option, but can opt to receive an alternate meal at any time. The system has resulted in an initial 59 cent cost savings per tray and the satisfaction rate among patients is above 90%.⁷

Plant-based meal options also better meet religious requirements, allergies, and food intolerances. For example, plant-based dining options better accommodate patients with lactose intolerance, which according to the NIH, affects 95 percent of Asian Americans, 60-80 percent of African Americans, 80-100 percent of American Indians, and 50-80 percent of Hispanic people.⁸ Given the extent to which these groups are overrepresented among inmate populations, BOP could take an important step forward. Furthermore, for patients eating a Halal or Kosher diet, plant-based dining options are one of the few cuisines that will consistently meet their dietary requirements. Lastly, an emerging disease called Alpha-Gal Syndrome (AGS), which often leads to allergic reactions to beef and pork consumption, now affects nearly half a million Americans.⁹ Plant-based dining options can better offer healthy choices for the vast majority of dietary approaches.

To that end, we request information to better understand how the BOP is currently feeding inmates and how the agency foresees better operations moving forward. We would appreciate responses to the following questions, as well as the department's insights into any of the issues and concerns raised:

- Does BOP offer plant-based proteins at every meal? On average, how many meals per week offer plant-based proteins?
- Which foodservice management contractors does BOP currently use? Do all facilities use contractors or are there any that do not?
- Across your foodservice accounts, how much is BOP paying for animal vs. plant products on a per calorie or per gram of protein basis?

⁶ What Is the Value-Based Proposition of Plant-Based Foods in Healthcare? A Cost-Benefit Analysis. Greener by Default.

⁷ Buckley, Cara. "How New York's Public Hospitals Cut Carbon Emissions: More Vegetables." New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/31/climate/new-york-hospitals-vegan-meals.html>

⁸ National Institutes of Health, Lactose Intolerance: Information for Health Care Providers (2006).

⁹ Anthes, Emily. "A Half-Million Americans May Have Tick-Linked Meat Allergy, C.D.C. Says." The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/health/alpha-gal-ticks-meat-allergy.html>

- How many inmates request special meals for religious/health/ethical reasons and how often is BOP able to meet those requests?
- Can any inmate choose the meat-free option or do they need to have a predetermined dietary restriction on file? Is this determined by a federal policy or at the facility level?
- What barriers does BOP see as critical to serving more plant proteins?


Lastly, we would appreciate BOP sharing results from the annual nutritional analysis that the agency conducts, as well as any information that you might have about the rates of diet-related disease in the federal prison population.

We recognize that BOP is charged with the enormous responsibility of protecting public safety while ensuring that federal offenders serve their sentences in a safe, humane, cost-efficient, and secure way. We look forward to receiving this information from BOP and appreciate your attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



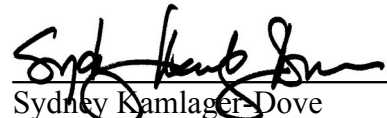
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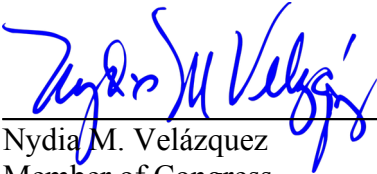
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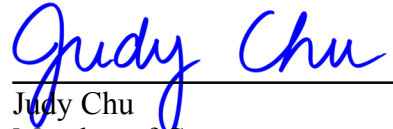
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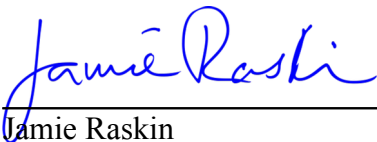
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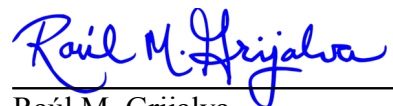
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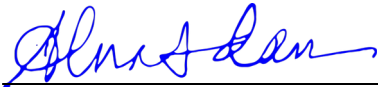
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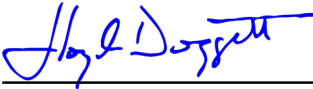
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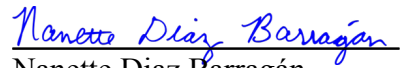
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