



HOW MUCH WILL MY CORRECTIONAL FOOD SERVICE COST ME?

This is the question most people want to know. The reality is it depends on a lot of factors. The most important consideration is what is your goal for food service? Do you want to serve the least amount of food while still meeting your state's minimum specs? Do you want to use food service to help control your inmates and minimize violence? Do you want to use food service to reward a certain behavior? Do you want the lowest cost possible to help shrinking budgets? Do you want the inmates to always be full?

THINGS TO CONSIDER THAT WILL INFLUENCE YOUR COST:

- Meal times: the shorter the spread between breakfast, lunch and dinner the less the labor costs. Most states require food be served no more than a certain length of time between meals. Be sure you are familiar with the regulations for your area.
- Number of calories: Some states dictate the minimum number of calories. Most daily calories in the correctional industry are between 2,000 and 2,800 calories. The more calories the higher the cost because more calories mean more food. At the lower end you may experience more complaints about being hungry and being starved. Usually if your staff stands strong and doesn't sympathize with the inmates these complaints go away quickly.
- Cold meal: the actual raw food cost for a cold meal may be more depending on the meal and menu. The savings is when the food service staff doesn't need to be on site for the meal thus saving labor. A cold breakfast where the correctional staff picks up the meal already prepared and ready to go the day before without help from the kitchen staff that morning saves money. The same can be said for a cold dinner meal. A cold lunch normally will not yield any labor savings.
- Number of spots for food in your trays: Many times an empty spot in a tray enables inmates to complain they are being cheated because all spots should be filled. Of course the number of full or empty spots has nothing to do with meeting calorie specifications. This has more to do with inmate management. If you think keeping food in all spots is important your cost may be higher.
- Menu: For nutritional purposes the menu needs to be well balanced and provide the proper level of protein, vitamins, minerals, etc. That said, a nutritious meal can be had with lower cost items. For example, substitute



ground beef with ground turkey or chicken. This will save money. Some use vegetable protein to replace some or all meat proteins. This is even less expensive. Be cautious. Canned green beans with stems and grasshoppers are cheap to buy but will cause other problems. Exceeding daily calorie requirements will also increase costs. You will want a registered dietitian to review and sign off that the menu meets your calorie and nutrition requirements.

- Kitchen equipment: the equipment in your kitchen will influence your menu which in turn influences your cost. So, keeping your kitchen equipment working properly is critical. Being forced to buy premade products because a certain piece of equipment isn't working adds cost. Having equipment to make items from scratch, but still buying premade and/or pre-portioned is a waste of money and increases costs.
- Products: generally the more made from scratch the lower the cost from the food cost consideration. That said, there is a balance of adding labor to save on food cost. Your inmate population and the willingness to use inmate labor will influence this. Another area to save is beverages. Pre-portioning bulk beverages by your staff (kitchen or guards) is less expensive than buying pre-portioned beverages. The same for condiments. Individual condiment servings cost about three times more than the same item in bulk.

- Inmate labor: Paid employee cost can be reduced by using inmate workers in the kitchen. There will need to be an employee in the kitchen when the inmates are working but one employee can train and supervise a number of inmate workers. Consider what inmate workers are permitted to do. Some correctional facilities will only let them wash dishes and mop floors. Some let them dish up the food and some let them do everything. The more the inmate workers can do the fewer paid employees are needed and thus the more savings to you.
- Storage space: too little dry storage space or insufficient refrigeration will cause orders to be placed more frequently or require different menus. These will influence your cost. Storage space on different levels from the kitchen or located a distance from the kitchen will increase labor costs.

A word of caution: there are some food service companies that will ask what your current price is and guarantee they can lower your cost without asking you about your food service goals or needs, seeing your facility, or even asking about your calorie requirements. This is like you buying a house without seeing it, knowing how many bedrooms it has, if it has a garage, or anything else about it. This is not to say occasionally you might not be happy with that house, but if so it would be purely by luck. Probably not the right way to buy a house and not a wise way to pick a food service provider.