THE PUBLIC PLATE IN NEW YORK CITY

A Guide to Institutional Meals
Executive Summary

New York City
Food Policy Center
AT HUNTER COLLEGE

Each year, ten New York City agencies serve an estimated 260 million meals, making the City one of the largest meal providers in the world. With the rising prevalence of diet related disease and mounting evidence of the crucial role of nutrition in determining health, interest has escalated in what urban planner Kevin Morgan has called "the public plate" as a lever for improvement of public health.[1] Others have noted that the sourcing of food for the public plate can support local and regional agriculture and food producers and provide stable employment for the growing population of under and unemployed New Yorkers. At the same time, environmentalists have raised concerns about the handling of waste from municipal agencies in general and from meals in particular, and about the carbon footprint and other environmental implications of urban food procurement practices. Finally, institutional meals are an important defense against hunger, a problem that continues to disrupt the lives and health of too many New Yorkers. Thus institutional food is at the intersection of health, economic development, environmental protection, and social justice.

The City spends more than a quarter of a billion dollars annually for the food served on the public plate, and nearly as much on labor for food preparation. Some NYC meals are planned, prepared and served directly by municipal agencies in public institutions such as schools and jails. Others are offered by independent nonprofit organizations with which the City contracts, such as senior centers or child care programs. Some are prepared by City employees in kitchen facilities owned and operated by the City, or by the staff members of contracted organizations in their own kitchens; others are produced by vendors from whom the meals are purchased by city agencies or contracted programs. Some are served at the sites at which they are prepared; others are prepared in central kitchens and delivered to satellite locations. This report explores this complex mix of institutional meals served by the City of New York.

Institutional meals in New York City rely heavily on federal funding. More than four-fifths of the cost is fully or partially reimbursed through federal child nutrition programs. In 2011, the Independent Budget Office calculated that the federal government, through the national School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program contributed $404,815,000; the State of NY $18,010,000; and the City $73,068,000 to school meals in New York City. The federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funds additional afterschool snacks and meals in child care centers, and the Summer Food Service Program funds meals offered in schools, parks, pools, libraries and other recreation programs. Further, meals served at senior centers and to homebound elderly and disabled persons are funded through the Senior Nutrition title of the Older American Act. In short, institutional meals use federal and to a lesser extent state dollars to ensure the well-being of New Yorkers and boost the economy.

The reach of the City's institutional meal service is great. On a typical school day, more than three-quarters of a million New Yorkers eat these meals: 638,000 school children, and more than 100,000 people in jails, homeless shelters, senior centers, meals on wheels programs, public hospitals and nursing homes, child care facilities, and substance abuse and mental health programs. Many eat more than one meal—students may eat breakfast and lunch at school, and a snack in an afterschool program. Hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters and jails provide three meals per day. At least 10,000 people work to produce and serve these meals. Add in the suppliers and distributors, the truck drivers, the administrators, the farmers and food processors, and the impact of this system on health and the economy is truly enormous.

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1. References are included in the full report, available at http://nycfoodpolicy.org/research/

The Agencies

Ten NYC agencies provide meals to New Yorkers. They are listed below in order of the number of meals and snacks served annually, from the largest to the smallest, based on the 2013 Food Metrics Report.

Agency	Number of Meals & Snacks Served as reported in 2013 NYC Food Metrics Report
Department of Education (DOE)	172,050,000
Administration for Children's Services (ACS)	24,108,829
Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD)	16,916,940
Department of Correction (DOC)	13,397,350
Department of Homeless Services (DHS)	11,530,897
Department for the Aging (DFTA)	11,309,377
NYC Health & Hospitals Corporation (HHC)	8,215,110
Department of Health & Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)	1,622,491
Human Resources Administration (HRA) HIV/AIDS Services Administration(HASA)	576,939
Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)	61,121
TOTAL	259,789,054

The Institutional Meals System

Is "system" the right word to describe this collection of agencies and activities? In some ways no: no one designed the NYC public plate and each program has its own history, target population, funding sources, authorizing legislation and set of regulations. No single person or agency directs or coordinates their activities. Nonetheless, they face common challenges and constraints; as a result these programs can benefit from opportunities to interact, share information, and cooperate. Three developments in recent years have promoted coordination and a degree of standardization that makes institutional food in New York City more like a system: the establishment of the Mayor's Office of the Food Policy Coordinator in 2007, the creation of the New York City Food Standards in 2008, and the inclusion of data on Agency Compliance with the NYC Food Standards among the metrics on which the city is required to report by Local Law 52 of 2011.

Office of the Food Policy Coordinator. Mayor Michael Bloomberg established the Office of the Food Policy Coordinator (OFPC) in January 2007. An Executive Order in 2008 provided a more formal basis, locating the Coordinator within the Office of the Mayor and mandating the Coordinator to report to the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. After the staff was expanded, the City began to refer to this office as the Mayor's Office of Food Policy, or MOFP. An early review identified the functions of the new office: "to convene the Food Policy Task Force and to coordinate the array of City agencies that are involved in hunger prevention, the promotion of health and wellness related to nutrition and the provision of food across the City." The MOFP is small, usually just the Coordinator and one additional staff person, but the Food Policy Task Force has grown quite large, including as many as ten city agencies, plus a representative of the City Council Speaker, and one from GrowNYC, the nonprofit group that runs NYC's Greenmarkets. Given its mandate to "promote access to and awareness about healthy food; combat food insecurity; and oversee the City's work to improve the sustainability of its food system," the responsibilities of the MOFP extend well beyond institutional meals, but it has provided, for the first time, a central place in city government where issues of public food service can be discussed.

The New York City Food Standards. One of the major initiatives of the MOFP is the creation of New York City Food Standards. An implementation guide prepared by the DOHMH describes the purpose of the regulations: "These standards aim to increase the availability of healthier food and beverage options and reduce the risk of health problems such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease." The standards were promulgated by Executive Order 122 in September, 2008; with city agencies required to be in compliance with revised standards by October, 2012. According to the Food Standards document, the "Standards for Meals/Snacks Purchased and Served… apply to all food and beverages provided to clients as part of meals, snacks, or other occasions where food is served." Specifically, the standards are designed to eliminate trans fat, to limit fat, especially saturated fat, sodium, and sugar, and to increase the intake of fiber-rich foods, especially whole grains, vegetables and fruits. In addition, they suggest that "when practicable" agencies should consider sustainability criteria for the food they procure.

Local Law 52 of 2011. Reflecting the notion that "what gets measured gets done," the NYC Council passed a Food Metrics law in 2011, requiring the collection and annual reporting of data on a wide array of food related topics: expenditures on nutrition education, for example, and the number and acreage of farms participating in the Department of Environmental Protection's Watershed Agricultural Program. Among the 23 metrics included, three

are particularly relevant to institutional meals: the total DOE expenditure on local dairy and produce, the number of salad bars in public schools, and the rate of agency compliance with the NYC Food Standards.

Key Stakeholders in New York City's Public Plate

In addition to the agencies listed above, and the many New Yorkers whom they serve, the key actors in this system include:

- The Mayor's Office of Food Policy; (MOFP) formerly known as the Office of the Food Policy Coordinator
- The Food Policy Task Force, which is composed of the 10 agencies identified above plus a representative of the City Council Speaker and a representative of GrowNYC
- The Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), which facilitates food procurement for some agencies
- The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), which serves as a technical assistance hub for the New York City Food Standards
- The Mayor's Office of Contract Services (MOCS), which helps to ensure that procurement guidelines are followed
- Other federal and state governments provide both funding and oversight
- Hundreds of nonprofit organizations contract with city agencies to provide social services that include meals and snacks
- Group purchasing organizations help these agencies obtain supplies at discount prices
- Distributors and food service companies deliver ingredients and sometimes complete meals

The many organizational actors involved, each with its own agenda, resources, and procedures make the institutional food system enormously complex. It is difficult to generalize about so diverse an enterprise. Whether one is looking at a gigantic organization providing meals for more than a million school children, or a day care home providing meals and snacks for a half dozen children each day, the process of meal provision has the same basic stages: menu planning, procurement, meal preparation, serving the meal and cleanup and waste management. How institutional meal providers confront the common challenges and constraints that they all face shape the implementation, quality and impact of their food services.

Meal Provision: Basic Parameters

Many factors influence the outcomes of primary concern: health, food security, sustainability and economic development. Among the most salient are the following.

Degree of Centralization. The settings in which the City offers food vary widely as to both size and system of food service. Some, such as SchoolFood or DOC, are highly centralized, affording agency heads a great deal of control over menu planning, procurement, and meal preparation and service. In these agencies, the same lunch menu may reach hundreds of thousands of people. Making these menus healthier, even in small ways, has widespread impact. Others are decentralized with menu and preparation choices as well as procurement decisions made

by hundreds of senior and day care center directors and cooks, day care homeowners, and youth-serving programs operated by nonprofits. In these settings, changing one menu may affect only a single gathering of children, youth or seniors. These sites, however, may be able to make local preferences (i.e., purchase of New York State apples or milk) a priority in ways that more centralized systems cannot, thus increasing the appeal and consumption of foods.

Competition. In some settings, such as DOC facilities, diners have few alternatives to the meals that are offered; in others, such as senior centers, they can easily take their business elsewhere. Thus, while all strive to prepare meals that are palatable and acceptable to their clientele, some agencies face stronger competitive pressures than others.

Finance. Meals and snacks served by NYC agencies may be funded by the City itself, by the state or federal government, by user fees, by charitable contributions, or by some combination of these sources. Each additional funding source adds a layer of accountability and complexity. The overall level of funding has a significant impact on food quality.

Regulation. All food service programs, like all restaurants in NYC, must meet food safety and food handling regulations of DOHMH. Since 2008, all have been required to comply with the NYC Food Standards, discussed previously, designed to promote healthier eating. In addition, programs generally have to comply with food-related regulations imposed by their various funding sources which often include eligibility regulations and rules governing procurement.

Infrastructure. Kitchen and dining space, equipment, storage space, refrigeration, electrical wiring, plumbing, loading docks, and parking spaces, all affect the types of meals and snacks that can be served. Similarly, the skills and knowledge of employees, knowledge of cooking techniques, even the recipes on file influence the ultimate impact of any food service program.

Consumer needs and preferences. The age of a program's typical customers, their physical and dental health, their religious obligations and cultural traditions, their food habits and preferences all affect what can be served with confidence.

Emerging Solutions

Achieving the multiple goals of institutional meals while living within the budget and coping with the other constraints is not easy, but NYC public agencies are making progress. We have identified seven types of emerging solutions to the challenge of providing healthy, appealing meals.

1. Menu and Recipe Innovation and Related Training. Both city agencies and nonprofit organizations have begun reformulating menus and training culinary staff to use healthier cooking techniques and to prepare fresh, whole ingredients.

2. Market Power. Agencies that serve many meals, like DOE or DOC, have enormous market power. They use it to obtain favorable prices, clearly an asset in the effort to stay within tight budgets, and they use it to convince vendors to provide healthier products that comply with the NYC food standards, such as lower sodium soups and sauces, and to reformulate products to enhance nutrition and palatability. Smaller, decentralized programs cannot command the same attention, but they can make use of Group Purchasing Organizations that aggregate their purchasing power to negotiate better prices and they can use the products formulated for larger agencies.

3. Buying Local. Buying locally (or regionally) grown farm products can contribute to the sustainability of the food system, help to preserve farms in the NYC "foodshed," keep dollars circulating in the local economy, provide employment for local workers, help programs obtain fresh produce at its peak of nutrition and palatability, and, some would argue, reduce total, though not local, emissions associated with transport. Efforts to expand local and regional purchasing have been undertaken by DCAS and by SchoolFood, and Greenmarket Co, a program of GROWNYC, helps decentralized agencies connect with regional producers.

4. Technology. HHC has invested heavily in a cook-chill system to centralize meal production in a single facility. This approach relies on batch cooking, rapid chilling, and on-site reheating to provide major meal components that are never frozen, improving palatability while controlling cost. DFTA is using web-based technology to support healthy menu planning at senior centers by developing a system of swappable items and distributing information on diabetic friendly and local seasonal foods.

5. Consumer Input. To assure consumer satisfaction, many agencies employ surveys, taste tests, client food committees or other means of customer feedback.

6. Outreach and Innovation. As part of a wider effort to combat hunger, NYC meal programs have expanded outreach and developed innovations that help to overcome barriers to participation. While much more remains to be done, especially with regard to the summer meals and school breakfast programs, innovations such as direct certification and Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) have shown promising results where implemented.

7. Reducing and Reusing Food Waste. Separation of organic matter for composting turns what would otherwise burden the landfill into a nutrient-rich substance prized by gardeners. DOC maintains a large composting facility on Rikers Island, and both schools and homeless shelters have participated in composting initiatives. An effort to replace styrofoam cafeteria trays with biodegradable and compostable trays is currently in progress.

Beyond the Public Plate

Although the NYC Food Standards apply only to public agencies and private groups contracting with the city, DOHMH has been leading a Healthy Hospital Food Initiative designed to improve the profile of food available to public and private hospital staff and visitors as well as patient meals. Participating institutions are urged to use the standards for foods purchased in cafeterias and hospital dining rooms, to increase the availability of salads, and to implement the City's vending machine standards for both foods and beverages. Thirty-four hospitals, including the 15 HHC institutions, have already signed on. The number of salad bars in HHC hospitals is among the food metrics mandated by Local Law 52. Private hospitals that sign on adopt the various standards at their own pace, but can

receive technical assistance from DOHMH. Even where organizations do not formally adopt aspects of the NYC Food Standards, the reformulation of products to meet agency specifications has the effect of making healthier products available to organizations that want them, and the overall emphasis on healthier eating has certainly raised consciousness throughout the food service sector. Similar efforts could be introduced at other quasi-public agencies such as the City University of New York and nonprofit universities and agencies that serve meals. By considering the City's "public plate" and its "nonprofit plate" as two intersecting systems and developing policies that develop the capacity of both sectors to better serve their customers, NYC has the potential to improve nutritional quality, reduce costs, support the local economy, and protect the environment for millions of city residents.

Recommendations: A baker's dozen

Each year NYC spends more than $500 million dollars on its public plate and in the last few years, the Food Standards, Food Policy Coordinator and new Group Purchasing Organizations have significantly strengthened the reach and quality of its institutional meals programs. The City now has an opportunity to ensure that these investments reach their full potential to reduce food insecurity and diet-related diseases and promote economic development and environmental sustainability. To achieve these goals, based on our assessment of New York City's public plate, we recommend that the Mayor, City Council and other parts of city government consider the following steps:

1. Strengthen the Office of the Food Policy Coordinator. The Office has accomplished a great deal with limited resources. It has created an opportunity for agencies engaged in serving meals to exchange ideas and information and support each other while confronting the challenges associated with providing healthier food in institutional settings. It has raised consciousness about the public plate and ignited conversations about using institutional food to promote health and the power of public procurement to enhance sustainability. To maximize these benefits and ensure that public dollars are spent wisely, the Mayor should add at least two full-time staff persons to the Office, one of whom would coordinate and provide oversight of the public plate. If NYC establishes a Food Policy Council, an idea currently receiving wide discussion, such a body might usefully serve as a citizens' advisory to the MOFP on institutional food and other matters.

2. Update the NYC Food Standards and continue to assist agencies to achieve full compliance. The Food Standards have served as a major step toward improving institutional food in NYC. They have resulted in the formulation of healthier products by food manufacturers and the selection of healthier items by distributors. They have raised consciousness among both agency staff and vendors and suppliers. They have been emulated by other localities, both in the U.S. and beyond. The NYC Food Standards should be periodically reviewed and updated based on experience and new evidence. The City should also expand the technical assistance it provides to agencies required to comply with the standards and continue to invite and assist other public and nonprofit organizations to implement the standards voluntarily.

3. Improve the data collection, analysis and reporting required for NYC Food Standards Compliance and food expenditures.

A. Compliance data. Local Law 52 of 2011 requires the city to report "the total number of programs… that are in full compliance with each such standard and the total number that are not

in full compliance with each such standard, sorted by agency." The result is a data fog, in which each agency reports these numbers for each of 74 standards. There is no analysis to show which standards are least frequently met (and therefore most difficult to meet) nor any discussion of the barriers to compliance experienced by agencies, both of which seem potentially useful steps towards improving meals. The current form is not user friendly, nor does it serve effectively to guide policy. The data vary in quality and reliability with some agencies sending monitors for site visits, while others rely heavily on program self-reports. While completing the self-report undoubtedly serves to focus attention on the standards, it is also time consuming. We urge the new administration to convene a discussion on the potential uses of the food metrics data on compliance and to consider seeking a revision in the wording of Local Law 52. The ultimate goal of reporting should be to provide data that both participating agencies and the Mayor's Office can use to guide further improvements in institutional food.

B. Aggregate data on food expenditure and food service costs. Most of the agencies we interviewed were not able to tell us how much was spent on food, nor the total cost of meal provision. Nor were they always able to identify the federal and state funding streams that contributed to their meal programs. This information would be useful to administrators, advocates and community organizations that work on food policy issues. The City should revise the food metrics to require the reporting of this information and commission a cost study by the Independent Budget Office. Such data should be available to the public annually with total spending on institutional food both by agency and for the City as a whole.

4. Expand participation in federally funded child nutrition programs in order to increase food security for NYC children, generate additional food service jobs, and stimulate the NYC economy. Vigorous action to expand participation to include all children in need is especially urgent in light of recent reductions in benefit levels in SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps, and additional cuts that the new Farm Bill will impose.

A. School Lunch. NYC should take full advantage of the Community Eligibility Option (CEO) and Provision 2 to provide school lunch free of charge to all children. By reducing the stigma and paperwork burden, universal free meals will eliminate important barriers to participation. Because school meals have been stigmatized so long as "welfare food," NYC should undertake a youth-led campaign to make school food "cool," increase its appeal to student opinion leaders and trendsetters, and solicit youth input and opinion in menu planning and food service. Some of the same creativity that went into DOHMH's "Pouring on the Pounds" advertising campaign might be harnessed for this effort.

B. School Breakfast. In 2012-13, NYC ranked dead last in school breakfast participation rates among 63 large urban and suburban districts recently studied. Although breakfast is available without charge to all children, advocates attribute the low breakfast participation rate to the practice of scheduling the meal 30 minutes before the start of the school day. Breakfast in the Classroom solves this problem and has dramatically increased participation in schools that have implemented this system school-wide. NYC should make Breakfast in the Classroom the norm by making it an "opt

out" rather than an "opt in" program for schools. If NYC were to serve breakfast to 70% of the students who eat a free lunch each day, a participation rate achieved or exceeded by the seven best performing districts in the study, 194,518 more breakfasts would be served each day, and more than $53 million additional federal dollars would flow into the NYC economy annually. At the union contractual rate of 2 labor hours per 100 breakfasts, this would mean an additional 648 6-hours a day jobs.

C. Summer Meals. Eligibility for free lunches and breakfasts under the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is based on "area eligibility." The program operates in neighborhoods where at least 50% of public school children are eligible for free or reduced price meals. In NYC, where about three-quarters of all public school students are eligible for free or reduced, almost all neighborhoods meet the area eligibility test. All children through age 18 are eligible to get both breakfast and lunch in the program regardless of family income residence, or immigration status. Advocates report that more than one million children are potentially eligible, but daily participation in lunch in July, the busiest month, has been less than 150,000. Most of the meals are prepared by SchoolFood, which serves them in school buildings and delivers them to pool, parks, housing projects, libraries, and community based organizations. NYC should continue its efforts to publicize the availability of summer meals and should increase access by making sure that at least one open school site is located near every housing project and in every low-income neighborhood. Creating summer jobs for youth to serve as summer meals ambassadors could help with outreach and publicity.

5. Advocate for improvements in federal and state food assistance programs. Given that more than four-fifths of the City's institutional meals are partially or wholly federally funded, and that the State of New York also contributes significant sums, the City administration should continue to advocate for improvements in these programs and the reimbursement they provide. Federal Child Nutrition programs are scheduled for reauthorization in 2015. The City should begin now to plan its strategy and to consult with other large cities to define an agenda. It should also consult with advocacy groups to elicit their suggestions. Specifically, the City should work for a cost-of-living differential in eligibility thresholds and reimbursement rates, a change that would benefit NYC where food costs in particular and cost of living in general are well above the national average.

6. Conduct systematic assessment of the discrepancies between published menus and actual offerings in a variety of institutional settings, and assess the palatability and appeal of meals as served. Such research should assess and compare the performance of various vendors and distributors. The goal of these observations is to inform modifications that can increase the uptake of institutional food by eligible participants.

7. Conduct a careful comparison of prices obtained by contractors using group purchasing organizations such as Essensa, Marketplace, and GPS. Senior centers, child care centers, shelters and other decentralized programs have several options for group purchasing, and the City should provide a careful and systematic cost and quality comparison among them and make available the results.

8. Foster a culture of consumer participation in menu planning and decision making. Participation in taste-testing and similar activities can be a powerful form of nutrition education as well as a way of ensuring that investments in new food items will be well spent. Existing taste-testing and related activities should be expanded,

and other means devised to elicit the active participation of consumers. In school food, the restoration of menu flexibility would help empower parents and students to take a more active role.

9. Build the capacity of foodservice workforce, especially in more decentralized foodservice systems, to make good purchasing and production decisions that favor the health and well-being of the populations served. This kind of training could build on the skills and relationships that supervisors and foodservice staff already have with clients at many institutional sites. Such training could improve the quality of food for the populations served by these workers directly, as well as the clients at satellite sites without kitchens (e.g., some child care and senior centers) where they also serve food. Offering new training programs to upgrade the skills of institutional food workers and adding a pay increment for cooks who have completed such training creates incentives for new skills and builds a new rung on the food service career ladder.

10. Increase the proportion of local food served on the public plate. NYC should shift the dominant paradigm for local and regional purchasing so that local purchasing is the default option. The goal is to have menu planners and procurement officers ask not only "here is our menu; what can we obtain from local sources?" but also "here is what is produced in our region; let's incorporate more of these items into our menus." Expanding the work begun by MOCS and DCAS to build geographic preference into city procurement can facilitate this process.

11. Build the market for healthy, fresh local produce by continuing and expanding efforts to integrate food with the curricula of schools, day care centers, after school programs, continuing education, and other institutional settings. Build upon and expand the successful models that have already been developed, and foster continued innovation. Advocate for the inclusion of "food education" in New York State curriculum standards.

12. Facilitate and nurture the establishment of local, mission-driven, community based catering and food processing organizations. Such organizations can provide meals for shelters, home-bound elderly and disabled meal delivery programs, senior centers, after school programs and child care providers that are unable to prepare meals on site. Such mission driven organizations might become alternatives to underperforming vendors identified through the research described in recommendation 6 and also create new employment opportunities for city residents.

13. Conduct a survey of kitchen facilities and equipment needs and work with CBOs and public agencies to secure the funds necessary for expansion of capacity. Schools, in particular, appear to have substantial unmet needs. Some schools have reported that a conversion to universal free school meals or school-wide breakfast in the classroom would require expanded kitchen capacity. Other schools and some senior centers indicate that lack of adequate kitchen facilities and equipment is a barrier to increasing reliance on fresh, whole foods, which take up more space in a kitchen than canned or frozen products.

In the last seven years, NYC has made substantial progress in improving its institutional food programs and weaving them into a system that can achieve health, economic, environmental and social justice goals. By building on these successes and taking coordinated action to address the problems we have described, NYC can set a standard for institutional food for the nation.

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