  
Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York

**Food Policy for Breakfast:**

**The Public Plate in NYC- Perspectives on Municipal Food Service**

February 18th, 2014

**Notes from the Panel Discussion**

**Moderated by Janet Poppendieck,** Policy Director, NYC Food Policy Center

Introduction to the Research:

**Emma Tsui**, Assistant Professor, MPH Program, Department of Health Sciences, Lehman College, CUNY School of Public Health **Jessica Wurwarg**, Former Director of the New York City Food Policy Center, current Director of Operations and Policy, Department of Strategy and Operations, NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development

* The Public Plate research effort was a collaborative effort across several departments, in which researchers looked at the topic of food service from a system perspective
* Challenges in the research:
  + Identifying who to contact in each department
  + Gathering detailed information about food expenditures – there remain missing details on this topic
  + Working with both centralized (like the Department of Correction) and decentralized organizations (Department of Youth and Community Development)
* There are advantages to both centralized and decentralized approaches and exploring both contributed to a more balanced perspective in the research

Panelist Discussions:

**Paulette Johnson,** Assistant Commissioner, NYC Department of Correction

* The average inmate population of NYC is approximately 12,000 – about 10,000 individuals on Rikers Island and about 2,000 in the borough jails
* The Department of Correction (DOC) began as a decentralized food system, but decided to centralize to facilitate purchasing and menu creation efforts
* The DOC prepares both hot meals and fresh bread for the inmates using their 5 kitchens
  + There are three kitchens, and there is one bakery, on Rikers Island and two kitchens for the borough jails
* The DOC serves a “heart healthy” menu with reduced sodium, saturated fat and cholesterol content
  + In 1997 the DOC eliminated fried foods from its menus and then complied with the NYC trans fat ban of the mid-2000s
  + The DOC began serving the heart healthy menu in 2010
* Kosher, halal and vegan/vegetarian foods are offered, as are other special diets like liquid diets and therapeutic/medical diets
* The average price of a meal served by the DOC is $1.15, excluding labor
* There have been challenges to implementing and maintaining the heart healthy menu:
  + Timely delivery of food and meals
  + Thoroughly reviewing all food labels to ensure compliance with the heart healthy menu standards
  + Maintaining communications with every stakeholder in the process, from the food service employees to the inmate council members
* Once the inmate population was involved in the discussions around the new menu standards, there was more-buy-in from the population
* The heart healthy menu involved changing the menu offerings and also reducing portion size - the DOC changed the dimensions of its food plates in tandem with the rollout of the new menu, so that the portions would not appear smaller than those of the previous menu
* The DOC discharged 61,000 in 2013 – because of the educational efforts of the DOC and the heart healthy menu, there is the potential for 61,000 to learn about healthier meals

**Lynn Loflin**, Executive Chef, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House

* Lenox Hill Neighborhood House (LHNH) is a 120 year old nonprofit organization that provides an array of human services to NYC residents.
* Ms. Loflin, who has extensive experience in the restaurant industry, was hired two years ago as LHNH’s first executive chef
* LHNH received a grant to continue its innovative efforts in elderly care, with a mandate to eliminate processed, frozen and canned foods from the menu offerings at their senior center for health and wellness
* As part of its innovative approach to care, the organization is open for all meals, 365 days a year
  + The organization serves breakfast, lunch and dinner at their senior center, child care programs, and other programs, such as the women’s shelter
* LHNH has reduced the meat portions served, which has freed up more space and funds for fresh produce and fresh grains
* The senior population especially had many opinions about the changes, but the changes to the menu were implemented incrementally, with the hope of cultivating buy-in. The organization also actively listened to these opinions during the implementation, and continues to listen
* Ms. Loflin and LHNH have experienced a number of challenges while improving the organization’s food services:
  + The facilities are old, often without adequate storage space for fresh food
  + There is a dearth of space to prep the fresh food as well
  + Compared to canned and frozen foods, there is more frequent ordering and more time-intensive prepping that must be completed each day
  + There is no data system in place to collect information about ordering practices and areas for potential improvement
  + There is a need for additional staff professional development and training

**Brian Goldblatt**, Sales Manager, Greenmarket Co. (A program of GrowNYC)

* Greenmarket Co. is a wholesale distribution program that delivers regionally produced foods to grocery stores, bodegas, restaurants, and other retail outlets in NYC
* The program seeks to fill the gap between individual purchasing and wholesale purchasing
* The program is a non-profit endeavor with the goal of promoting local and regional food producers. Local and regional products include produce, grains, flours, eggs, yogurt and cheese.
* Greenmarket Co, a relatively young program, has faced challenges:
  + Real estate in NYC is expensive – the program currently operates out of a warehouse, but is expanding rapidly and needs additional space to continue this expansion
  + It can be difficult to generate buy-in from potential clients in part because of the perception that local food is expensive to purchase
  + The program cannot respond to “next-day” food ordering requests as some food distributors can. Greenmarket Co. must contact the farmer(s) to order the food products, the farmer(s) must pack the food and send it to Greenmarket Co., and then Greenmarket Co. must transport the food to the client. This process takes 3-4 days.
  + Clients must adjust their ordering procedures to accommodate the Greenmarket Co. process
* Greenmarket Co., though, has the capacity to train those who work in the food system on how to order and utilize fresh food and produce efficiently

Question & Answer:

**Is there data available to demonstrate that the DOC heart healthy menu has contributed to improved inmate health?**

* **Paulette Johnson**: The Department of Correction does not currently have hard data on inmate health improvements, but she has heard many comments from inmates about how they like the new menu and feel better, feel healthier.
* **Jan Poppendieck**: Institutions should consider ways to collect information and research that could shed light on possible positive changes

**Do these institutions and organizations address food waste through composting?**

* **Lynn Loflin**: GrowNYC has helped Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, in collaboration with the Department of Sanitation, to begin a composting program at the LHNH senior center
* **PJ**: Rikers Island composts all organic waste
* **JP**: The Public Plate Institutional meals report includes information about institutional food composting practices, for those interested in learning more.
* **Jessica Wurwarg**: The Department of Homeless Services of NYC also composts

**How are those who actually consume the food involved in discussions of institutional menu changes?**

* **PJ**: A committee was formed in advance of the rollout of the DOC menu changes, and an educational campaign for the inmates was implemented before the changes as well.
* **LL**: LHNH mandates quarterly meetings with the senior citizens the organization serves to discuss issues and collect feedback from the seniors. Additionally, the organization holds roundtables each Friday to talk about nutrition and to conduct cooking demonstration. The organization also receives lots of anecdotal feedback during these meetings. Food consumption numbers have increased among the senior population at LHNH, compared to previous years before the new menu changes.

**Can you all speak on the quality of school food?**

* **JP**: The Department of Education is the largest provider of meals in NYC. The school food standards were created in 2007, though the DOE and Executive Chef Jorge Collazo started making positive changes before then.
  + Of the 1,700 schools, 1,200 have kitchens. It is an enormous, decentralized system - the DOE served approximately 650,000 lunches per day.
  + Challenges in school food:
    - Elimination or reduction of menu flexibility due to cost increases
    - Parents have fewer opportunities to comment on school food menus
    - Competitive foods, like vending machines can be a major problem
  + Highlighting positive developments:
    - NYC school food stakeholders have become a part of a larger national alliance to advocate for antibiotic-free chicken
    - The DOE has been sending 3.2 million Styrofoam trays to landfills each week, but is moving towards using biodegradable food trays in all NYC foods

**Can institutional food systems be an opportunity to create good food jobs?**

* **PJ**: The DOC employs fewer than 200 employees – in many instances, inmates help prepare the food.
* **JP**: There are more than 6,000 food service employees in the DOE. These jobs are unionized, but they are not well-paying and benefits are eroding. The Health and Hospitals Corporation also has some unionized food service jobs, as well as non-unionized vendor jobs.
* **LL**: LHNH has taken on many inters to facilitate skill exchanges, so that food employees can grow their skill set. Chefs and others from the food industry really enjoy participating in these efforts