

The Lowdown

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Managing the Orange County Detention Center is one of my most important responsibilities. While inmates are in the custody of the county, we provide for their safety, medical care, and transportation to and from court. We also feed them, and in this month's *Lowdown*, I want to explain how we accomplish this.

Anyone who has hosted a dinner party for a dozen people knows that preparing a meal for a large group can be challenging. Imagine this: cooking and serving three meals a day EVERY DAY for approximately 127 people. Not only that, you must meet state nutritional guidelines, you are required to accommodate religious and dietary restrictions, you have no dining room, and you must do this in a 95-year old facility.

This is not a hypothetical scenario. Juan Ortez, Trisha Corbett, Linda Booker, Ramon Rangel, Jackie Irby, and Fred McAdoo do this every day. They are the dietary staff at our detention facility, and they are unsung heroes.

Based on our average daily census of 127, our staff prepares approximately 381 meals per day, which is 2667 meals per week, and 138,684 meals per year. Our kitchen is small, measuring only 24' x 30'. Within those 720 square feet are many pieces of commercial kitchen equipment, two large trash cans, and two of the three rolling carts used for delivering the food to the inmates. [The task requires three carts, but only two can fit in the kitchen at a time.] Actual working space is extremely limited and highly coordinated movements are required!

The kitchen operates 13 hours a day, starting at 4 am. The staff serves breakfast at 6 am, lunch at 11 am, and dinner at 4 pm. The kitchen closes at 5 pm. All meals are hot, except for the evening meal on Saturday and Sunday; those include sandwiches, carrots, and an apple.

The dietary staff washes dishes by hand before running them through a sanitizer. Weekly, they also stock the pantry, refrigerator, and freezer with supplies. It takes two hours to stock the shelves with food from one large delivery truck.

A registered dietician with the Orange County Health Department plans the meals. By state regulation, an inmate must receive two dairy servings, two fruit

servings (one must be citrus), three servings of vegetables, two servings of meat or protein, and four servings of whole grain or enriched bread every day for a total of 2100- 2500 calories. We serve milk, orange juice, or unsweetened tea. If an inmate wants a sweetened drink, he or she must purchase it from the canteen.

We source much of our food locally. Latta's Egg Ranch, located just north of Hillsborough, is our egg vendor. The North Carolina State Farmer's Market delivers our fresh produce weekly. In order to minimize our impact on the environment, we work with a commercial compost company – it picks up our food waste twice a week – and Piedmont Biofuels comes once a month to recycle our grease.

For safety reasons, we do not serve food on hard trays. All meat must be boneless, and inmates cannot have access to metal utensils. We do not have a cafeteria; inmates eat in their cells. Unfortunately, we have not found a suitable alternative to the Styrofoam food containers we use to serve the meals. We tried biodegradable containers, but found they were not durable enough. We continue to search for a better solution.

The dietary staff, some of whom have worked in upscale restaurants, admits that working in the detention center requires an adjustment. When they arrive at work, they are locked into the facility. Some people cannot get comfortable with that reality, but most people who accept this job figure out a way to make it work for them; my most senior staffer has been with the detention center for over 18 years.

Although the work is difficult, it comes with job security. This “restaurant” is in little danger of going out of business, and Orange County employees enjoy good benefits. Additionally, the work is rewarding. The inmates often provide positive feedback, and detention officers provide assistance by cracking eggs and chopping vegetables. There is a strong sense of camaraderie among all people who work in the detention center. As Fred McAdoo, one of the cooks, told me recently, “To be successful here, you have to love the employees and you can't hate the inmates.”