

Something still stinks in Michigan and Ohio's prison kitchens

Empty promises

By Stephen Katz





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It's difficult to look at Aramark's management of Michigan and Ohio's prison kitchens and not call it a disaster.

A series of reports over a two-year period in Michigan told of disturbing incidents in which the company served food tainted by maggots on multiple occasions, knowingly served rotten meat, ordered inmates to serve food pulled from the garbage, handed out food on which rats nibbled, and served moldy food. The substandard ingredients and small portions led to prisoner protests and lawsuits. Oh, and the company overbilled the state of Michigan by \$3.4 million for the pleasure.

Things were no better in Ohio. The Buckeye State cited Aramark 240 times in 2014 for shorting inmates on food. The state's prison kitchens have also seen issues with maggots, mice turds, employee shortages, substandard food, and unsanitary conditions.

Even though a majority of Michiganders wanted Aramark out for a long time, Gov. Rick Snyder didn't end the three-year, \$145 million contract until July. The state replaced the company with Trinity Services Group, a private Florida-based food giant, which receives \$12 million more annually than Aramark.

The good news: Prisoners have yet to find maggots in their Trinity-branded potatoes.

The bad news: Trinity's potatoes are often rotten or too dried out to eat. And there are far fewer of them.

In fact, prisoners at two facilities we spoke to say rotten and expired food is still common. The portions are smaller than ever, leading to suspicion that Trinity isn't providing the 2,600 calories required by state law, and a prisoner charges he was recently hospitalized because Trinity ignored his medical diet.

In other words, Michigan may have booted Aramark, but not much has changed. And it doesn't help that Trinity hired many of the employees Aramark fired when it left the state.

"The only thing they did was switch the employees' shirts," Lamont Heard, a prisoner serving life for murder in Michigan's Kinross Correctional Facility, tells us. "It's the same people— they just switched the title, but the food is worse. Everything is worse than with Aramark."

In Ohio, the prisons' unions offered to run the kitchens for less money than Aramark, but Ohio's Department of Rehabilitation and Correction opted to extend Aramark's contract in June while boosting its pay from \$110 million to \$130 million over two years. As a precautionary measure, Michigan and Ohio hired more monitors to ensure prisoners aren't starving or eating larvae. So there's that.

But even with the monitors in place, problems with sanitation, tainted food, food shortages, and Aramark employees having sexual contact with inmates persist in Ohio, prison employee union chief Chris Mabe says.

Prisoners and officials say those problems didn't exist when the state ran the mess hall, and the situation is not an "Aramark problem" or a "Trinity problem," it's a privatization problem.

"There are things you cannot tamper with in prisons, like food, because that leads to a volatile situation," Mabe says. "There's only one way to make money privatizing food service, and that's the shortcuts: not training your staff, cutting quality, not maintaining sanitation standards, serving less food. Those are dollars in private companies' pockets."

Aramark, the world's largest institutional food conglomerate, and Trinity, plop meals onto prisoners' trays at around 950 detention centers in North America, according to the companies' websites.

But that figure is dropping, mostly because Aramark is establishing itself as the poster child for all that's wrong with privatization, due in no small part to widely publicized incidents in Michigan and Ohio.

Trinity's record is better than Aramark, but the bar is low. Last year the Southern Center for Human Rights considered suing the company for allegedly starving inmates in Georgia.

Trinity didn't return calls seeking comment.

Starving inmates

When asked about the small portions, Michigan Department of Corrections spokesman Chris Gautz questioned how inmates could keep track of calories. Heard, the prisoner in Michigan's Kinross Correctional Facility, says the eyeball test is sufficient to know it's happening, but says he also consults a book that provides prison meal calorie counts.

Over the past three years, he and several other Muslim prisoners successfully sued the MDOC and Aramark in federal court multiple times for refusing to provide the state-mandated 2,600 daily calories to Muslim prisoners during Ramadan.

When the MDOC lied to the judge about the calorie counts, Heard proved their fibs, and the MDOC was found in contempt of court.

Since Trinity took over, other issues include rotten fruit, rotten potatoes, and expired milk, prisoners say. The line where the food is served is filthy and unsanitary, trays are dirty, food is cross-contaminated, and Trinity staff refuses to wear hairnets. The food is so bad that some are skipping meals even though they're hungry, say Heard and Randy Jones, another Kinross prisoner.

"The food is worse. Somehow, the food got worse. Whatever they cook, no matter what it is, it's always worse. Now, everyone has a negative attitude toward Trinity. It's the same as before," Jones says.

The prisoners claim inmates who file grievances face retribution from Trinity staff. If a prisoner reports a problem, then he's likely to end up with the smallest slice of cake on the next run through the chow line.

And the grievances go to Trinity's food boss, so little is resolved.

"It's like complaining to the wolf about what's going on in the hen house," Heard says, adding that the staff is on its best behavior if Trinity brass is visiting the site.

Kenneth Williams, also a prisoner at Kinross, deals with kidney issues that require a special diet. He tells me that Trinity refuses to consistently feed him that diet, and that led to a recent hospitalization.

"I'm angry. This could cause me to be on dialysis, and that's what I keep telling them," Williams says. "I'm trying to avoid being on dialysis. Once your kidneys start failing, then everything starts failing.

"A lot of times I end up going without eating. I go hungry."

And in Ohio, the story is the same as it was before the state re-signed Aramark in June, Mabe says. The union is in arbitration with the state in an effort to regain the contract.

Beyond the run-of-the-mill Aramark problems, the company is now trying to wiggle out of buying beef and milk from the state, as Mabe says its contract requires. That could cost Ohio millions of dollars. In the Belmont Correctional Institute, Aramark employees recently ordered inmates working in the kitchen to use can lids to cut meat because there is no meat slicer. In 2015, around 65 Aramark employees were fired for security violations, and over 200 are banned from entering Ohio prisons.

Alex Friedmann, associate director of the Human Rights Defense Center and managing editor of Prison Legal News, contends the short-term, upfront savings private companies offer are deceptive.

The 30 new monitors Michigan installed to "clamp down" on private companies cost money. Medical expenses are high for prisoners like Williams who aren't receiving the correct medical diet. There's a consistent pattern of private companies charging taxpayers for more prison meals than they serve. Contracts typically increase in cost with each renegotiation. A report shows Aramark violated its Michigan contract 3,707 times, and only around 1,700 of the issues were resolved.

The headaches are endless.

"It goes back to the question, 'Do you really want a private company to feed inmates?' Looking at the horrific past record of, say, Aramark, it's the whole refrain about how the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," Friedmann says.

The case against starving inmates

To be clear, no one is asking the state to polish the silver and lay out a buffet for a bunch of thugs, criminals, murderers, and goons. However, lunch shouldn't be so bad, or there shouldn't be so little of it, that it leads to riots, protests, confrontation, and a general destabilization of the prison yard.

Heard says that's exactly what's happening.

"The thing is when there's not enough food, or it's half-cooked or rotten so no one wants to eat it, the only thing a guy is going to do is go over there and take food from the weaker guys," he says. "It all falls on the weaker prisoners. If someone else weaker is eating something from commissary, he's going to become a target."

That situation can escalate, and that puts inmates and guards at risk, says Mabe, who worked as a prison guard in Ohio for 20 years.

"You must maintain standards to keep peace because they're violent places to work, and one ripple creates a wave at the end of the day," he says.

Over the past 10 years, Aramark's rotten food and low calorie counts sparked enough riots, hunger strikes, violence, and inmate protests that many of the company's critics are essentially labeling its recipe books a security threat.

In an interview with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution for a story on the company underfeeding Georgia inmates, a Trinity spokesman defended the company's meal plans, saying, "We could have a bigger discussion of why they're there to begin with."

Mabe notes part of the reason for incarceration is rehabilitation, and starving inmates doesn't fit into the equation. The vast majority of those in the prison system are getting out one day. He questions the wisdom of underfeeding people society wants to rehabilitate and reintegrate.

"Our job is to provide a safe, secure environment, and prepare them to come back to the streets where they're your neighbor and my neighbor. We're not trying to create criminals, we're trying to create productive members of society," he says. "We can't take the stance that we're going to feed them bread and water and think they'll come back and be productive."

Friedmann, who served 10 years in prison in Tennessee, sees it similarly, and notes that the debate on starving inmates or feeding them rotten food has already been settled. We don't do that, he says, "because we are decent human beings."

"If we consider them indecent, then we don't remedy that by being equally indecent by treating them like animals and feeding them garbage," Friedmann says. "We lose our moral high ground to say anything, and we're just as bad as them."

But Gautz says the MDOC isn't finding the same problems with Trinity as it did with Aramark.

"Overall, Trinity has been responsive to issues that have come up. We have had a small number of issues in the first five to six months, but when there have been issues, Trinity has been quick to terminate staff and correct the issues with enhanced training," Gautz says. "We've had a lot of positive feedback in terms of quality, and feedback in terms of fewer number of complaints."

Prisoners, however, see it differently.

"The food is horrible. People don't want to eat it. And there's less of it. You might as well go eat grass," Heard says.

Friedmann and Mabe say the only way to remedy the issues is to spend more money and place well-paid, well-trained employees in the prisons. Private companies can offer lower prices than the unions, but cost savings are found in cutting food quantity, cutting quality, or cutting staff and/or pay.

Friedmann says those shortcuts lead to "legitimate long-term costs."

"There's that allure to the notion that you can save money by contracting with these companies. Did Aramark actually save anyone money? I don't know. It's hard to say

because we're dealing in the theoretical," Friedmann says. "But we're dealing with all the problems and their employees, and those are additional costs on the system.

"Whenever we hire a private company, what we're trying to do is achieve cost savings in the short term. Are those savings worth the effort in the long term, especially when the cost is going to go up on the next contract?" he asks. "Probably not."