

Food service workers: Critical to care

Healthy, nutritious food is critical to restoring and maintaining good health.

Food service workers in health care settings require specialized knowledge, matching each patient's diet to their needs. Dietary restrictions, allergies, cultural factors and personal preferences must all be considered.

Developing menus, purchasing ingredients and managing supplies all require special expertise. Preparing and presenting food that is nutritious, fresh and appealing requires a high level of skill and organization. Special care is needed to ensure that dishes are sterile and the kitchen is free from bacteria or disease.

In hospitals, mealtime can be a high point in a patient's day and an opportunity for human contact. When the food is appetizing and staff have the time to help, patients are more likely to eat – speeding their recovery. When that's not the case, more trays come back untouched and patients' health suffers.

Public sector food service workers are a critical part of the health care team.

On the front line

Food service workers monitor patients' food needs and eating habits.

Each patient has dietary restrictions and allergies that food services workers must be familiar with. Proper attention and care can mean the difference between life and death.

The dietary departments of hospitals and nursing homes include a wide range of specialized staff, each playing a role in ensuring patients and staff are provided nutritious, appealing food in a cost-effective manner.

Contracting out reduces quality

In the UK, hospitals, municipal councils and school boards have cancelled food service contracts with Aramark because they failed to meet quality standards and budget guidelines.

A prison riot broke out in response to the poor-quality lunch served in a Florida jail. Aramark employees tried to compensate for the shortage of ingredients by diluting a recipe with ketchup. The food service contractor had also been observed working in filthy conditions and cooking food that had already spoiled.

Closer to home, many health care facilities are serving up reheated food in place of freshly cooked meals. Food is prepared in a factory setting, then chilled, transported and reheated in expensive 'rethermalizing' carts. Experience to date suggests 'rethermalized' food does not save on costs and tastes as bad as it sounds.

Reduced quality of contracted our food services at the Toronto Hospital has led the facility to build a kitchen and bring dietary work back in-house. Still, hospital officials will often overlook the long-term costs of contracting out in the interests of apparent short-term savings.

Increased Costs

Contracting out food services makes money for corporations but costs the public more in the end. Often, contract terms allow private investors to reap big profits during the early years of a "public-private partnership" food service operation. But once centralized food facilities require new money to replace worn out equipment, they become the responsibility of the public sector.

A Marrack Watts/KPMG study of a Winnipeg hospital concluded that keeping operations in-house would save \$32.1 million over 20 years. The cost of buying prepared foods from private contractors was estimated to be 10 to 20 per cent higher than if the food was prepared in-house.

Mary Immaculata Hospital in Willingdon, Alberta terminated a contract for food services with Versa Services after they found it was cheaper to provide the service in-house.

Staffing sacrificed to bottom line

The St. Louis Post Dispatch interviewed about 700 nursing home workers about wages and working conditions. The workers said they were unwilling to accept poverty level wages for their demanding work that often requires overtime and double shifts. The study found that the “corporate focus on the bottom line frequently requires managers to operate homes with skeleton staffing.”

Nine out of ten long-term care facilities in the Missouri-based sample are understaffed.

Private companies like Bitove, Aramark and Sodexo MS Marriott are anxious to benefit from health care privatization. The only way to profit is to cut corners and costs by replacing dedicated, experienced health care support workers with low-wage, inexperienced staff – a move that will lead to high turnover.

Patient health suffers

In 1996, New Brunswick’s Atlantic Health Corporation awarded a contract to Bitove Corporation to replace in-house food preparation. Lower food quality undermined patients’ health: 20 per cent of residents lost weight and another 20 per cent suffered from gastro-intestinal symptoms such as diarrhea, vomiting, cramps and gas.

A review of American government documents and court records reveals that hundreds of nursing home patients die from neglect in facilities with contracted out food services. Starvation and dehydration were found to be two of the three major causes of death.

Keep it public

Cutting corners for profit results in less variety, lower quality and poorer health. It also means fewer jobs and lower wages, undermining local economies and reducing local control.

Privatizing food services puts an essential part of our health system at risk.

Contracting out CUPE members’ work undermines public health care.

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Updated October 2003