

- Food Services Manager at Warner Creek Correctional Facility.
- 13 months in Lakeview.
- Previously at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

Peter Little: How much does food play into the annual budget for the prison?

Alyssa Smith: Food is everything. Budget wise, I receive a huge chunk. Even though we keep our food costs per inmate around \$2.30 per day, we still get a substantial amount. The budget includes equipment, salaries, and it is a bi-annual fiscal cycle.

PL: So where does most of the food come from (is it government subsidized foods, commodity foods, USDA foods)?

AS: We have a central distributor center in Salem and they contact vendors all over the state. They buy in bulk and store it in the central warehouse to support the 14 correctional facilities in OR. They plan the menu around the items received at the distribution center. So if they get a big order of chicken, we are going to have a lot of chicken on the men.

PL: So the central distribution center is where the menu items are determined?

AS: Yeah, and they involve the food managers and they have a dietician to help make the menu. We sit down and hash through the menus. Usually they are really planned well, so usually it is just small changes. So if you look at menus two years ago, they all basically look the same. That is how we save money, in addition to inmate labor.

PL: So the prison kitchen is run by the inmates?

AS: Yes. They are directed by supervisors, but they do all the labor.

PL: Do they need to have a food handler's certificate?

AS: Its not required at this level. But, for example at Coffee Creek I taught food handlers information to the women there, not because they needed it to work in the prison, but because they would need it when they get out to work at Denny's. We would like to have it so they all needed a food handlers certificate, but we would have to charge them. Sometimes it would have to go through the county. We would have to charge them \$10 per inmate and that is a lot of money for an inmate. We would like to get it set up like Coffee Creek is set up. So we teach them about proper storage techniques, cooking methods, and all that is taught by the supervisors.

AS: The education they get is basically the same information that is covered in the food handlers' course for the certificate. I would encourage the women at Coffee Creek to take the test every year, because even I forget the temperature of chicken is, or pork. All the sanitation rules keep changing so it is good to keep updating.

PL: Do you do food surveys among the inmates to learn what it is they like or dislike?

AS: Yes. We do a survey every two years. Right now they are re-vamping the survey. Once that is done on the inmates, I send that to Salem and based on overall consensus state wide we will go on the suggestions they make as best we can. It's a good thing.

PL: What are the most popular foods among prisoners?

AS: Oh, they love their French fries. They love the French fries and the hamburgers. These guys are definitely protein-based creatures. It is totally new to me because the women at Coffee Creek are all about the deserts. There are definite differences. I also serve more food here. Before I came on there was an issue about portions, which it seems

like that's always the case. Across the boards they doubled portions. Doubled the bread, the starch, except for protein and dessert. Well, that got expensive. I found out they were throwing a lot of the food away. They were just doing it to do it, which is typical. What I did was straighten it out giving extra if they wanted it or opening a new bag of lettuce only if it was going to be eaten. Sometimes there are just soo many leftovers it is just mind boggling, and waste is just costly.

PL: So there is a real effort to minimize plate waste at the facility?

AS: Oh, oh yeah. Some facilities have a policy of 'you take it you eat it'. This facility has chosen not to do that. I made it so it was cost effective, healthy, and we wouldn't have to worry about that. Salad is a no brainer. Everybody likes vegetables. They are cleaning their plates pretty good.

PL: In your experience, would you say the inmates a nutrition-minded?

AS: I would say so. These guys are. The weight that some inmates gains is interesting. You know the women gain a lot of weight coming into the prison system. I believe that state-wide, these guys eat pretty good. I am not ashamed of this facility's food. I will bring my family in and sit them down and have a meal. I eat here everyday. There is nothing wrong with these guys' skills, and the women did a bang-up job as well.

PL: So women desired their deserts?

AS: Oh yeah. You could really tell. You would know when to get that extra chocolate cake out. You bet. I laugh about it, but it is so true. Having comfort foods is so important. I bought the guys here a popcorn machine because popcorn is not only cheap, but it is comforting. They show a movie once a week and I figured why not have popcorn. It does a lot for the overall moral of things. If the food is good and they get treats every once and a while, basically the whole place is running smoothly. It is remarkable. Every once in a while I will hit a road bump and I will look into it. Also, I will make sure I know who it is that is complaining, because you get to know the ones who complain a lot. But if it is an inmate that doesn't usually complain and he has a problem with something, I will start poking around a little bit because it is important to me. I figure if the they are throwing the food away, why am I even bothering. That is just as expensive as feeding them. Waste going in the garbage is expensive. I am not here just to slop food on their tray and send them up to their unit. I am here, in some ways, to make them happy about the food quality.

PL: Do inmates request certain foods that have cultural significance to them?

AS: Well, basically, with probably the exception of the Native Americans, we have like stir fry. We a Mexican dish once a week. We have burritos. The Native food is a little bit harder. We have fried chicken. We have celebrated ethnic months. We will work with the CDC and do a little menu shuffling if we can pull it off, as long as the whole population benefits. For Asian month, for that particular day, we had stir fry, egg flour soup. We had Cinco de Mayo. Now it is tough to open it up for everybody, because that's sort of like a dam. It would be hard to open it up to every single culture. The Native Americans celebrate quite often. They have their sweats and sometimes we will order fry bread. Their traditions are based around eating deer and salmon and I will tell you that there are some FDA regulations and issues with that. So, we can only do so much. We don't have any kosher currently. The CDC does have some kosher items. Unfortunately, they are all vegetarian, which after a while they get sick of it. I feel bad for them, but what do you do.

AS: The veggie tray is offered at every meal. The garden will supplement what we get from the CDC. We get lettuce, tomatoes, celery, garlic, onions from the CDC. The stuff I am getting out of the garden, and it will only be getting better, we will be cutting down on what we need to order from the CDC. For example, for the stir fry we will not have to use frozen vegetables, instead we can use fresh vegetables from the garden.

AS: We were eating tomatoes last year when everybody else was cut off because they were just too expensive. We were sitting back for weeks eating the tomatoes. We were sticking them in the freezer for sauces and stuff. It was wonderful. So now we are really able to enhance our meals. We had fresh zucchini one night.

PL: Are veggie trays popular?

AS: Actually, veggie trays are a meat alternative meal. They are geared toward meeting every dietary and religious need. They have lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, sometimes radishes. It is for those who don't like what else is being served. It is for those who can't eat pork. It's for those who just want to drop some weight. I know many individuals who have lost major weight eating the veggie trays. It fits all needs for most people, even people with allergies.

PL: So who decides on proportions?

AS: The dietician. There is a certain calorie count for each meal. I would say these guys are getting between 4,000 and 5,000 calories each day. The women get the same amount. They are getting as much as the men. That's why they usually gain weight.

PL: Is fasting even allowed in the prison?

AS: You know, these guys are really funny and it makes us sometimes kind of skeptical. Sometimes they even cheat on their own religion. I have never heard of them fasting. Some of the inmates celebrate Ramadan, and for a lot of them it is very special.

PL: How involved in the garden are you?

AS: Oh yeah. I came after it was already built. I am out there everyday walking around, talking to them, and I get a lot of the equipment that they use, and so they know I am serious about and care about it.

AS: The de-hydrator that was ordered just as I got here is great. I mean it cost \$12,000. I was wondering what I was going to do with it. My main motivation was to find out what to do with it that would keep inmates busy. I sat thinking what can I make with the machine that will help everybody. So I thought beef jerky, but that was a no go because they can get it on canteen. Some of the inmates never come down to eat because they are living entirely off of canteen. They can get refried beans, chips, candy bars, and be complete garbage cans. The number one selling item on canteen is Top-Ramen. They can buy cases and that is the one item we watch, because if that item goes up in costs, we are going to have a problem. Believe it or not, they are stock piling. There could be a riot or hunger or whatever. Anyhow, it struck me: noodle cups. When I get the green flag from Salem. The whole idea is to supplement the Top-Ramon meal with de-hydrated vegetables from the garden. We have made fruit leather, fruit roll-ups, granola bars, apple rings. You name it, those guys have probably dehydrated it.

AS: For the most part, the inmates don't have it to bad. They can't have gum because they stick gum in key locks and we can't have that.

AS: The garden is only in its second year. I am going to make sure that it expands and goes outside the fence to grow corn, potatoes, artichokes. There is a long strip that

has been prepped and all it needs now is water. I am going to keep pushing it and pushing it as long as they let me. That is my goal.

AS: Another idea I have is to possibly donate some of it locally or send some of it on the CDC truck so inmates in the valley can try it.

AS: It is so therapeutic. The garden is just so therapeutic for these guys. They go up there and they want to stay up there. They work the ground. They weed. They water. They shovel the dirt. I think it is really good. They seem really happy. That is really good for people who need to get out of the mainstream.

AS: We should raise fish too, because fish are really relaxing too. That probably won't work because critters will come in.

AS: We are growing pumpkins that will be used for pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving.

AS: Our gardens are no chemicals. We can't even have natural, pepper based stuff. If an inmate gets it on his hands and then rubs his eyes it could create problems. We use natural repellents, the birdhouses, waxes, and soap sprays. The garlic is also a good deterrent. If you look at the tomatoes plants, none of the leaves are chewed on.

AS: We are having good success and I am very, very proud. I go up there and tell just how proud of them I am. They work so hard and everything they do reflects on all of us. What some of these guys really need a sense of self-pride in them and to know that they have accomplished something. That is good for them. So, it is not just about food. I just like to see everyone happy.

AS: When they shut down the garden at Coffee Creek it was a real downer for the inmates. Now they have tried to get it going again, but that really affected them. It is a minimum security facility and they have some lifers in there and I will tell you its hard to keep a lifer happy and interested in something. Dead-end job syndrome is a real problem. They can get their GED, but after a while they will run out of things to do. People love the garden for a long period of time, if not forever. It never gets boring. They really enjoy being out there. It is a real rush for me to see them out there enjoying it. They are very lucky fellow.

AS: I'm part of a new generation that looks at these facilities as places to help people do better with their lives. I even ask inmates how to grow peppers in my own garden. They have a lot of knowledge. I wouldn't say this is a wonderful place to have to live, but the inmates don't have it so bad.