



Testimony of Kate MacKenzie, Executive Director, NYC Mayor's Office of Food Policy

Before the New York City Council's Committees on Contracts and Economic Development Oversight Hearing on Food Quality in NYC Shelters

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Good morning, Chair Won, Chair Fariñas, and members of the Committees on Contracts and Economic Development. My name is Kate MacKenzie, and I serve as Executive Director of the Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP). Joining me today are my colleagues from the Department of Social Services (DSS), First Deputy Commissioner Jill Berry, Associate Commissioner, Special Population Support Services, Cindy Teta, Assistant Commissioner and Diversity Officer Raymond Medina, and from the Mayor's Office of Contract Services (MOCS), Deputy Director for Procurement Operations Mehak Kapoor. I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today about food quality in NYC shelters.

The mission of Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP) is to advance the City's efforts to increase food security, promote access to and consumption of healthy foods, and support economic and environmental sustainability across the food system. As part of that, MOFP supports the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Mayor's Office of Contract Services (MOCS) in their efforts to improve food quality, nutrition, and operational efficiency across the city's shelter system. We do this by providing strategic advisement and support in several ways, including contract language revisions, data collection, contract management and enforcement, menu adjustments, culinary training, food education, and other programmatic opportunities that enhance the effectiveness of agency food programs. These efforts aim to ensure that the food served in shelters and other institutional settings meets high standards for nutrition, quality, and affordability.

MOFP also brings subject matter expertise to MOCS to ensure that the contracting tools and resources it offers are in line with city requirements and priorities. For example, MOFP will soon include a new section on our website to provide helpful information specific to food vendors. We have also worked closely with MOCS to promote the utilization of best value bids for food, when possible. A best value bid allows city agencies to buy goods taking into account quality and equity. For the first time this year, the DOC included in its bid evaluation, not only cost, but other desirable attributes like taste, support to NYS food businesses, and organic products. MOFP also works with MOCS and food-buying agencies to incorporate Good Food Purchasing initiative data reporting requirements into solicitations and contracts.

Overview



The New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) serves more than 14 million meals and snacks annually throughout the shelter system. There are three ways that meals are provided in DHS shelters. First, in shelters operated by DHS (30), DHS has three direct contracts that have a total contract value of \$160,170,824.42 over a three-year period (7/1/2023-6/30/2026). This means that the vendors are responsible for delivering meals, typically frozen, to the shelter, and shelter staff are responsible for heating, serving the meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Second, a provider may subcontract with a food vendor. In this case, a provider is required to obtain three bids. Approximately 347 providers run facilities use a food vendor. And, in the third case, a provider may prepare its own food (50 sites prepare meals on site or at another shelter in the provider network). The reasonable accommodation process is available to meet clients' religious and medical needs (e.g., kosher, halal, and a renal/dialysis diet).

Value Statement

DHS provides three meals each day, and snacks to clients. The meals are expected to be healthy, served at appropriate temperature, respect the medical dietary needs and/or religious requests of the individuals served, and reflect the diversity of cultures served throughout the shelter system. By following these guidelines, the agency strives to provide quality meals to the population that needs them, with as little waste as possible.

Quality Control and Feedback Systems

DHS uses a variety of systems to measure and control quality. All meals are required to adhere to the NYC Food Standards and meal service must adhere to sanitary codes. These standards are updated every three years based on current scientific evidence, the ability of the industry to meet those standards, and agency feedback. Menus sent to the DHS nutritionist are analyzed to determine compliance to these standards. And FY 25 was the first year that agencies were required to report client/consumer feedback centrally to DHS.

The DHS requires shelter directors, or their designees, to conduct monthly meal quality tests. These tests evaluate temperature, appearance, and accuracy for each meal period (breakfast, lunch, and dinner). Providers are required to submit menus with nutritional information to DHS for review when initiating meal services and whenever there is a change in the vendor or the menu. Usually, providers have a spring/summer menu and a winter/fall menu. If a menu is found noncompliant, DHS provides feedback and, as needed, technical assistance. Providers are also required to keep a sample of all meals for a prescribed period of time (two days in fridge or three days in freezer); these samples may be subject to microbial testing by DOHMH in case of food poisoning/infection. Together, this process of inspections and reviews by DOHMH and DHS provide continual monitoring and assessment of food quality at DHS shelters. Through all these systems, from client level feedback, to checks from DOHMH, to inspections that DHS staff conduct – these could all result in corrective action plans if warranted.



In addition to DHS' efforts to monitor and assess food quality, we maintain open lines of communication for clients to provide input on food quality. Clients may reach out to 311 or the DSS Ombudsman with feedback (the Office of the Ombudsman can be reached by phone at 800-994-6494, or via email at ombudsman@dss.nyc.gov). DHS logs complaints (using its IQ database system) and triages for direction to appropriate DHS staff and providers. Lastly, DHS conducts client satisfaction surveys. One avenue for that triage process is for DHS' program administrators to make the shelter provider aware of the complaint, and if warranted, work with them to create corrective action plans.

As noted above, all shelter providers are required to solicit and report on client feedback. In addition, DHS conducted a small, QR code-based anonymous food satisfaction survey, for direct input from shelter clients.

Vendor Performance

Vendors, whether they are direct meal providers, or the providers that sub-contract meal service, are required to report on a variety of factors to achieve optimal meal quality.

All shelter providers that prepare or serve meals are required to hold a food service establishment permit from the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). This ensures that DOHMH is aware and able to conduct an initial inspection to verify that the meal set-up is appropriate and that the food service staff have a food handler certificate demonstrating that they have received food service training. DOHMH annually inspects all sites to ensure compliance with New York City and New York State food safety regulations.

In addition to the annual DOHMH inspections, DHS conducts Routine Site Review Inspections (RSRI) twice a year to monitor the requirements and reporting outlined above. These inspections involve reviewing kitchens and seating areas for cleanliness, properly operating equipment, proper storage of food, permits for food handlers, proper temperatures for the storing and serving of meals, and recordkeeping. RSRI results are incorporated into the quarterly Shelter Repair Squad (SRS) scorecard on DHS' website. Any of these checks, as well as the client feedback could trigger a corrective action plan.

Finally, DHS adheres to Procurement Policy Board (PPB) rules regarding documentation and evaluation of vendor performance call for periodic, unannounced checks, interviews, and surveys of clients.

Opportunities for New Vendors

In line with the Administration's goals of building a robust ecosystem of vendors and serving as a strong partner in MWBE success, the DSS Marketplace Team is launching a capacity building workshop series in March. The series aims to help local restaurants and catering companies interested in adding a business development component to enable them to execute large-scale



food service. The series is designed to strengthen the business's ability to engage with NYC agencies, human service providers, and prime contract holders. The workshops will bring firms together with representatives from the Mayor's Office of Food Policy, DOHMH, DSS Program and Nutritional Staff, and the Department of Small Business Services for detailed guidance that will help these local organizations better understand the requirements and resources impacting firms operating in this space. It will include extensive Q&A with subject-matter experts. Later programming will leverage mentorship, bringing local restaurants and catering companies together with successful certified contractors and non-profit food providers currently performing on City contracts to support information-sharing and resourcing. The workshop series will culminate in a Matchmaking Event bringing vendors together with human service providers and agency representatives. We believe this effort will contribute to more local participation, diverse food, profitable contract experiences for participating firms, and competition for food contracts over the longer term.

The safety and well-being of DHS clients requires this complex food distribution systems to operate well. This drives the robust processes for oversight and obtaining feedback from clients that I've described. DHS has a quality control process so that the critical control points of food safety, including appropriate temperature, storage of food, safe environment, and hygiene are as strong as possible. DHS is engaging in a process at this time to strengthen its guidance, training, and oversight to ensure the highest food quality at our shelters, especially as the landscape has experienced such dramatic shifts over the last several years.

Introduction 905

Introduction 905 (Won) would require food service contractors with city agencies with contracts valued over \$100,000 or more to provide standardized feedback surveys to consumers of their service on a quarterly basis. While we support the intention of this bill, we would like to work with the Council to consider how it would advance our shared goals to increase transparency and food quality across agencies. As noted previously, agencies are now required to solicit feedback on meals and snacks served. Additionally, many factors influencing client feedback, including taste and presentation, are determined by food preparation, which vendors do not control. We look forward to discussing how best to achieve our shared goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. We welcome your questions.