

## Are Clark County Jail meal requests kosher? ✓

**That's one issue facility is facing as spike in special religious diets sends food costs soaring**

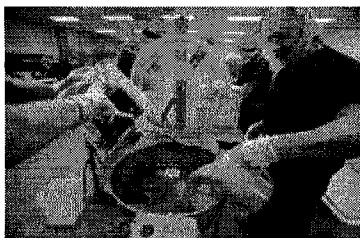


Photo by Troy Wayrynen

An inmate adds dressing to a salad while preparing a kosher lunch at the Clark County Jail Work Center on Friday. Food costs are on the rise at the county jail and one of the reasons is an increasing number of inmates are requesting more expensive kosher meals. Food Services Manager Joe Loftgren says he's looking at all options for saving money, including changing the way the jail dresses salads to save as little as 5 cents per plate.

By Erik Hidle

As of Monday, January 21, 2013



By Steven Lane

Rob Woodard pours liquid eggs into a mixer to make muffins at the Clark County Jail Work Center.



Photo by Steven Lane

Inmates prepare a typical, non-specialized lunch at the Clark County Jail Work Center earlier this month.

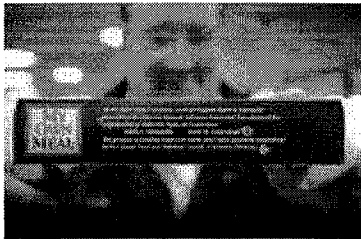


Photo by Troy Wayrynen

Joe Loftgren, food services manager at the Clark County Jail Work Center, holds a kosher dinner meal box detailing the kosher certification of a prepackaged meal.

**WHAT IT COSTS**  
Average meal cost per inmate

**Regular**

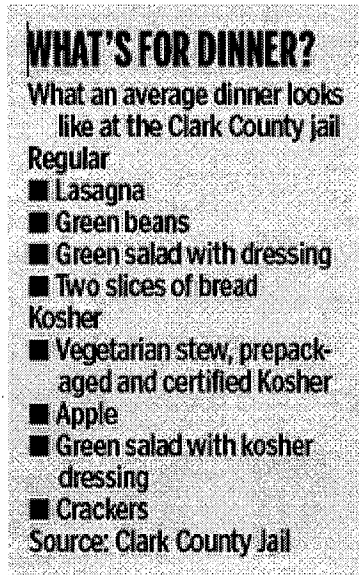
- Breakfast: \$1.66
- Lunch: \$1.66
- Dinner: \$1.66
- Total: \$4.98

**Kosher**

- Breakfast: \$2.08
- Lunch: \$2.49
- Dinner: \$7.21
- Total: 11.78

Source: Clark County Jail, May 2012

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Inmates at the Clark County Jail are taking part in what has become an expensive nationwide trend of going kosher.

The increase in kosher requests is occurring at such a steep rate that experts are dubious of some prisoners' sincerity, and it has the Clark County Sheriff's Office planning for a worst-case financial scenario going into the next two years.

In 2011, Clark County Jail staff estimates around 1 percent of the inmate population requested a special religious diet. Today, 10.8 percent of the population is requesting a religious meal, and nearly all of those are for kosher dishes. The jail prepares around 2,500 meals on any given day. That means around 250 of the dishes are being prepared at a much higher cost.

At the time of the county's budget estimate, drafted in May 2012, providing a specialized religious diet to an inmate costs the county, on average, \$6.80 more per day than an inmate dining on the typical fare.

Due to that added expense, and the rise in requests, the cost to feed the jail population is budgeted to rise from \$1.8 million in the 2011-12 budget to \$2.5 million in 2013-14.

It's a scenario that puts the county in a tough bind, both financially and legally. Kosher meals cost more to make, and federal law requires jails across the country to cater to the religious dietary requests of their inmates.

"It's the subject of much litigation across the United States," said Joseph Barnett, custody branch commander. "The inmates still have constitutional rights, and they still have religious rights. If they submit a request in writing, then we provide a religious meal. We're following the law."

So as requests go up, the county provides. And as the county provides, costs go up.

**Why the increase? Here's one theory**

Gary Friedman, a former Jewish corrections chaplain based in Seattle, considers himself to be a leading authority on dietary rules and regulations in the United States corrections system. He suspects the rise in Clark County follows a national trend where many of the kosher requests come from a belief based on misguided views on meal safety, not on religion.

"The primary motivation is, they think it's safer," Friedman said. "I can't count how many times it's happened, how many times it has come up, that you hear stories how (jails) buy food that is out of date or how inmate workers are tainting the food. So they think (kosher meals) are safer and it is of better quality."

Friedman uses an example from Pierce County where an inmate requested a kosher meal and was denied. A recorded phone call between the inmate and his mother showed that the request came over concern there would be spit in the regular meals.

And while religious meals must be provided to those with sincere religious beliefs, the law doesn't provide for sanitary concerns.

## **Regional spike**

Friedman says the spike seen in requests in Clark County, and the associated per day cost increase, is typical.

Nearby jails and state prisons confirm they, too, are seeing the rise.

Cowlitz County Corrections Department Director Marin Fox Hight says the Cowlitz jail is seeing an increase in requests for religious meals.

"We have (seen an increase in requests) for the past two to three years," Fox Hight said. "I think the inmates are better educated, and they know if they ask for it, we have to provide it."

Multnomah County Sheriff's Office Lt. Steve Alexander said Oregon's largest county is just starting to see an uptick in religious meal requests.

"Yes, we are seeing it," Alexander said. "We are seeing an increase with an emphasis on kosher. We're above 40 (inmates) now requesting them."

That's a small percentage of Multnomah's average inmate population of 1,300. But unlike other counties that have seen increases occur over the past few years, Multnomah's two jails began to see a spike in religious meal requests in just the past three months.

"I think we're going to see more in the future," Alexander said. "I believe it will continue to increase."

The Washington State Department of Corrections is seeing the rise across the state, as well. Religious meals currently are eaten by just below 10 percent of the more than 16,500 inmates incarcerated at the state level on any given day.

"I can confirm that we started to have an increase about a year-and-a-half ago," said corrections spokeswoman Angela Dice. "But I don't have any numbers (from that time frame) to indicate the size

of the increase."

## Question of sincerity

Legally, the counties can't deny a request outright, even if they suspect the reason for the request isn't religious in nature. But many folks wonder how many are legitimate requests and how many follow Friedman's hypothesis. After all, there doesn't seem to be a drastic increase in the Jewish population outside the county jail.

"I don't think there have been many people (from the jail), at least that I am aware, that have requested to convert," said Vancouver Rabbi Shmulik Greenberg. "What I am saying is, (Friedman) has a point."

But jail staff know while some inmates mask their intentions for a meal, that doesn't mean the sincerely devout should suffer. It leaves corrections departments with a difficult proposition when it comes to judging who is or isn't telling the truth.

"I'm thinking more and more the way to do it is to give them the diet and then monitor them," Friedman said. "You monitor their store purchases, see what they do in terms of bartering ... and then you have cause to take them off of the diet. It's really difficult for them to assess somebody upfront."

Clark County currently follows that practice in determining which inmates are sincere.

"If an inmate is exhibiting behaviors inconsistent with their stated beliefs, then there can be an administrative hearing and it can be taken away," Barnett said. "We have about two or three of those hearings each week."

The other way to mitigate the problem is to reduce costs. But that, too, is a tough option.

"What happens is, (jails) make the meals as unattractive as possible and as paltry as possible, and (it affects) the people who are sincere and actually require it," Friedman said. "It also confirms to inmates that they can play those games."

## Avoiding the food cliff

Even with the national trend heading upward, the county is optimistic it won't hit the \$2.5 million expenditure.

"The budget was intended to plan for the worst and hope for the best," said Darin Rouhier, finance manager for the sheriff's office.

Rouhier said the increase was calculated at a time when the jail was seeing an increase in inmate population and increases in fuel costs and food demand, along with the additional requests for religious meals.

"The last thing you want to do is undershoot it," Rouhier said. "And just because you budget it, doesn't mean you spend it. Right now, I think things have been mitigated; but if we had been on autopilot, we would be going up in costs a lot faster."

Rouhier points out that the inmate population has declined since last year's projection, and notes there are indicators that food prices are stabilizing.

Still, he says he recognizes the cost to cater meals for the jail's population definitely isn't going down, and it's likely the requests for religious meals will continue to rise.

He gives credit to Food Services Manager Joe Loftgren for finding ways to decrease the costs of meals for both standard and special diets, which include the religious meals, as well as medical and dietary restricted plates.

## Containing costs

Loftgren is the guy who fretted over milk prices rising at the end of last year as the U.S. Congress debated an extension to the farm bill. He's spent hours reading trade magazines, looking for ways to balance rising prices with proper nutrition. And he's working on ways to reduce the cost of meals through strategic purchasing.

He talks excitedly about the recent closure of a nearby Italian restaurant chain. It means he can make an aggressive buy on pasta sauce soon, saving the county a few dollars in the process.

He has eight-foot-tall stacks of saltine crackers stored near the kitchen. He proudly talks about how he got them at nearly half the cost. More savings on the year.

Each day, from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., a jail staff of 11 and a work crew of more than 40 inmates prepare between 2,300 and 2,600 meals to feed those housed at the main jail, the work center and a juvenile facility.

Most of the plates see food such as hot dogs, rice soup and salads prepared assembly-line style in the main kitchen. The efficiency of the operation has the cost to feed an inmate at an average of \$4.98 per day for the jail's standard fare. Breakfast, lunch and dinner each cost about \$1.66 to make.

To prepare a kosher dish, however, requires special ordering and preparation of food. The orange in the breakfast must be kosher, perhaps a different protein needs to be presented at lunch, and at dinner the entree must be swapped with a shelf-stored heatable dish that comes prepackaged as kosher-approved.

When the jail calculated its costs for the 2013-14 budget, it found that on average, a kosher breakfast cost \$2.08, lunch cost \$2.49 and dinner cost \$7.21.

It's a rugged hit to what Loftgren calls "a penny business," but the jail has already taken steps to mitigate the hit.

Loftgren said he can't go into specifics about upcoming contract bids in March, but his current estimate has kosher diets dropping to a cost of \$9.03 per day through 2013.

"It means I just saved \$300,000 if the numbers stay steady," Loftgren said. "I don't think they will stay steady, but I'm still excited about that number."

Loftgren is optimistic he can cut the cost even further on his kosher meals, and he's looking at everything to find savings.

A cardboard box in Loftgren's office is filled with dressing packets certified as kosher. He'll introduce them to meals by the end of the month, replacing the current method of providing dressing, and hopefully saving five cents per plate. And that five cents has him pretty happy.

"I'm not joking when I say we are a penny business," Loftgren said. "At over 1 million meals served each year, it adds up."

The bottom line, Loftgren says, is that he believes special meals will make up 20 percent of the jail's food offerings in 2013. And religious meals will likely rise along with that number, continuing to drive up the cost.

"There are cost savings we can look at," Loftgren said. "But when 10.2 percent of my population is on a religious diet, it's a hit."

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