

Prison guards: Michigan is deliberately hiding extent of prison kitchen horror show

By [Tom Perkins](#)



Since Michigan privatized its prison kitchens in 2014, [problems with Trinity and Aramark's employees](#) have been [well documented](#). But of all the issues, one that corrections officers say hasn't received much attention is also perhaps the most dangerous — gangs are trying to exploit Trinity's weaknesses to exert control over the food supply. Former corrections officer David Angel, who spent four years working in prison kitchens, provides a fairly simple explanation about why gangs are eager to do so.

“When you are a part of a gang trying to gain power, you try to control the aspects of the prison that earn money,” he tells *Metro Times*. “Money, sex, and drugs control the prison system. That’s the trifecta. When you control one, you can control or get the other two.”

“Through the disbursement of food products, you gain financial power. In prison, power is everything. It means you have control.”

So the kitchens are a logical place for gangs to make a move, Angel says. “If they steal food from the kitchen — whether it be five pounds of cheese, five pounds of turkey, 10 pounds of hamburger — they can sell that for money. If you can generate cash flow, then you control a portion of the prison.”

Officers say the kitchens are vulnerable because Trinity is understaffing them, undertraining employees, and underpaying employees. They allege that the Tampa-based company has unwittingly hired gang members along with inmates' family members and ex inmates.

But Trinity's problems extend [well beyond gangs](#). Documents show some Trinity employees have supplied drugs to inmates, or taken drugs or drank on the job. Trinity employees [have had sexual](#) contact [with inmates](#) so [many times](#) that one officer tells us, “We can tell which new [Trinity] employees will walk out of the prison with a boyfriend.”

Officers say that in 2017, a Trinity employee tried to hand keys to a prisoner, then later left keys unattended in a lock. Other employees have lost keys or sharp tools that could be used as weapons. In another instance, an employee was fired for giving an inmate 30 pounds of stolen peanut butter.

These types of issues aren't all new when it comes to private prison food vendors in Michigan. But *Metro Times* spoke with a group that has largely been silent on the issues until now — corrections officers.

They say the prison kitchens are worse than what's publicly known because the MDOC is deliberately underreporting problems. Beyond that, officers corroborated inmates' claims of issues with sanitation, rotten food, calorie shortages, and other food service-related problems.

The sum is creating a dangerous situation in which inmates and officers are angry, officers tell us. In recent years, there [have been](#) multiple [reports of unrest](#) that [stem from kitchen issues](#), including a 2016 [riot at the Upper Peninsula's Kinross Correctional Facility](#).

Officers say the MDOC's failure to do anything meaningful about the situation and allegations that it's underreporting the problems has forged an odd alliance between inmates and officers against the MDOC administration.

"It used to be a community — us and the administration against the inmates. Now it's us and the inmates against the administration," says retired MDOC corrections officer Pamela Drew. "How sad is that?"

"I get emails from corrections officers all over the state," she adds. "Food service is the number one gripe, but it's also the total disrespect and disregard for the staff and inmates, and the idea that those of us with the boots on the ground have no idea what we're talking about."

MDOC administration denies that it's intentionally underreporting problems, and a spokesperson tells *Metro Times* that Trinity is responsive to issues, so the agency doesn't need to document all incidents.

[The biggest concern I hear over and over again is, "Someone is going to get killed." click to tweet](#)

Regardless, we could be witnessing the final chapter in Michigan's foray into privatizing prison food service. After the state fired its union kitchen employees and hired Aramark to run the chow hall in mid-2014, Aramark and Trinity — which took over the kitchens in 2016 — regularly violated their contracts, overbilled the state by millions dollars, were [fined millions of dollars](#) over contract violations, allegedly had millions of dollars of fines forgiven, and have been a consistent source of bad PR for the state.

Privatized food service hasn't been the money-saver Republicans leading Michigan thought it would be, and, in January, governor Rick Snyder announced [Michigan wouldn't be renewing Trinity's contract](#). Corrections officers say that can't happen soon enough.

"People are going to lose their lives over this," says retired corrections officer Ron Taylor.

"Something is gonna click and when it does, God help us," Drew adds. "It could lead to a statewide riot. But the biggest concern I hear over and over again is, 'Someone is going to get killed. Someone is going to get killed.'"

Underreporting

Officers say that Trinity employees have been caught smuggling in cell phones, tools, heroin, pills, cigarettes, Seboxone, cocaine, love letters, and other contraband. They've lost track of scissors and knives, don't show up for work, quit during shifts, and steal.

But many of these types of issues aren't being properly reported by MDOC administration, officers say.

Per agency protocol, violations of MDOC rules that interfere with the prison's ability to function should trigger a stop work order, officers tell us. The stop order bars an employee from prison grounds and notifies all MDOC prison staff of the offense while it's investigated. If the investigation finds that an illegal or negligent incident occurred, then the employee is fired and possibly prosecuted. The order is also subject to the Freedom Of Information Act.

But officers claim that the MDOC is no longer issuing stop orders for all incidents. They say they know because current corrections officers quietly working in each prison provide retired officers with information on incidents that should have resulted in stop orders. Retired officers supplied the incident list to *Metro Times*. *Metro Times* then submitted a FOIA request to the MDOC for all stop orders and cross-checked that list against the list provided by officers. The MDOC's list showed about 207 incidents involving Trinity employees (and hundreds more for employees of Aramark), while the officers' list showed about 60 incidents for which the MDOC doesn't appear to have issued a stop order.

Officers claim that there are more incidents for which stop orders should have been issued, but the problems are so frequent that they simply can't track everything across the state.

The MDOC gets around issuing stop work orders by having Trinity handle problems internally, officers say. In other instances, employees "quit," though it's in essence a forced quit. The MDOC doesn't need to issue a stop work order on a quit.

"They're not reporting quits, even though the quits are under questionable circumstances," Taylor says.

When that happens, the media and politicians who ultimately make the decisions about the MDOC's budget — decisions that impact officers' and inmates' safety — are in the dark, along with the public. [‘It used to be a community — us and the administration against the inmates. Now it’s us and the inmates against the administration. How sad is that?’ click to tweet](#)

"A lot of the time these people just disappear off of the job, so if an officer is nearby and knows what happens, then they tell us. Otherwise, you don't know why they're gone," Taylor says. "It allows the MDOC to lower figures."

MDOC spokesman Chris Gautz says regardless of which avenue the MDOC pursues — issuing a stop order or allowing Trinity to handle the situation — the employee is out of the prison.

"The bottom line is, whether the person is fired or stop ordered, or both, that person is no longer going to be working in our facility," Gautz said in an email.

He also praised Trinity: "We appreciate the fast action Trinity has taken in many cases and not letting issues fester. They have taken decisive action, and when we feel it is necessary, we have issued stop orders on top of that."

But corrections officers don't buy Gautz's explanation, and claim that the MDOC is attempting to make it appear like there are fewer problems.

"It's sad," Drew says. "It sounds like a conspiracy, but they're good at that."

Rotting food and kitchens

Over the last several years, inmates at multiple prisons detailed to *Metro Times* a range of issues in Trinity-run kitchens.

Several who [we spoke with in January](#) at Jackson's G. Robert Cotton Correctional Facility claim that Trinity serves old food and rotten fruit. The [stench of rotting potatoes](#) is commonplace, inmates say, and Trinity is known to re-serve food that has already left the line or been dropped on the floor. Inmate and media reports say food shortages, maggots, mice, mice feces, insects, and ants are common issues in prison kitchens across the state.

Unsurprisingly, there are also problems with sanitation. Inmates we spoke with say Trinity employees prepare food without gloves, the food service line is regularly crusted with old food, mold infestations are common, and bins used to defrost chicken are used to hold potatoes and vegetables. They also allege that they don't have the proper cleaning equipment, appliances like ovens are frequently broken, and Trinity simply ignores the issues. There have also been reports of confrontations between inmates and Trinity employees.

MDOC spokesman Gautz previously denied inmates' allegations and charged that they are lying. But officers we spoke with say inmates' accounts are accurate, and that Gautz is lying. They referred to him as "[Baghdad Bob](#)."

Officers say the kitchens are filthy, and provided photographs that showed the "slimey" conditions in one facility.

"We always had a very clean kitchen when we had [state] kitchen service workers in there," a current officer who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal tells us. The officer says it's now up to corrections staff to deal with Trinity's mess, which places an extra burden on officers who are already stretched thin.

"You would think Trinity would maintain the same kind of sanitary standards that you would have in a restaurant ... but it got so bad in our kitchen that we had to bring in crews with power washers to clean the grease off the ceiling and the floors. The bugs, the mice, ants — there's consistent problems," the officer tells us.

However, Gautz suggested in January that inmates are to blame for widespread sanitation issues because they clean the kitchens.

Several corrections officers say they're stunned that Gautz would make such a comment. They note that the \$158 million Trinity contract requires the company to keep the kitchens clean, and also pointed out that many of the inmates are teens or young people who grew up in broken homes. There are people in prison "who will drink alcohol out of their shoe, and when there's that mentality, why would Gautz assume that [inmates] can clean?" one officer asks.

"It's so dismissive of our security," Drew adds. "The inmates should know not to hate each other, they should know enough not to stab each other ... harm each other or hurt each other — there are a lot of things that they should know, but I guess that's why we're here."

Another officer likened it to adults asking children to clean up.

"They don't know how to clean to a food-service standard," the officer says. "There are things that you're not going to know unless you're trained ... and it's Trinity's job to supervise these guys. They're getting paid to do that. That's in their contract."

Gautz also previously told *Metro Times* that prison kitchen inspectors haven't found any issues, but officers say inspectors are former food-service heads on MDOC payroll who falsely report that the kitchens are clean.

Then there are the meal portions, which one officer likened to "an elementary school lunch tray." Officers say

Trinity employees report feeling pressed by the company “to minimize the amount of food that they’re sending to the units.”

Trinity employees sometimes fail to order enough food to feed the prison population, leaving hundreds of hungry inmates standing around in the chow line, a situation that retired officer Barb Patterson calls “very dangerous.”

When the food does show up, it’s so bad that it’s nearly inedible. While no one is suggesting pot-au-feu for inmates, officers say Trinity cut food costs by eliminating salt and spices from meals, along with any other relatively “good” dishes that prisoners used to receive. Documents also show that Trinity has been repeatedly fined for substitutions, like pizza served on hot dog buns, or peanut butter in place of meat.

Patterson adds that officers used to eat prison food, but no longer do because it’s so bad. And, he says, the food is so bad that it’s destabilizing the prison.

“The food causes a lot of tension between prisoners, especially indigent prisoners, because this is all they have to eat,” Patterson says. “So you get a lot more fights over the food, especially if someone gets better food [from the commissary].”

When gangs run the kitchens

Retired officer Angel says gangs can take over when a gang leader is hired into a kitchen position. He’ll behave like the model prisoner and earn the trust of a kitchen employee before attempting to get other gang members hired.

At that point, inmates who are not part of the gang are either forced out or forced to cooperate with the gangs, and “mini power struggles” ensue in the kitchen, officers say. “There’s a lot of stuff that goes on back there that Trinity workers don’t see happen,” one officer tells us.

Angel says it takes a strong authority presence to thwart gangs, and inexperienced, underpaid, undertrained, or corrupt Trinity employees either work with the gang members or are helpless. Some Trinity workers have expressed fear of going back in the kitchen alone, officers say.

[‘The gang problem in the kitchen is worse lately. If you have Trinity staff who are interested in bringing in drugs and having sex with inmates, then they aren't going to be enforcing the rules.’ click to tweet](#)

Angel adds that the kitchens are one of the most dangerous places in the prison, which is why he says he finds it so absurd that a private food vendor runs them.

“I knew and every person in MDOC knew that it was the wrong move,” he says of the state hiring private food vendors. “That doesn't mean there aren't corrupt state employees. It means the level of punishment and level of risk went way down when the state privatized. If a Trinity worker [gets caught working with gang members] then they lose out on a [low-paying] job. If I get caught, then I lose a \$60,000 per year job. That’s a big decline in pay. And that’s huge incentive to follow the line.”

MDOC spokesman Gautz says the officers’ claims are “anecdotal observations” contradicted by observations of an “intelligence unit” that monitors gang activity. He also says gang-identified prisoners are not allowed to work in the kitchens.

But officers disagree with Gautz’s assessment.

“The gang problem in the kitchen is worse lately,” says retired corrections officer Taylor. “If you have Trinity staff who are interested in bringing in drugs and having sex with inmates, then they aren't going to be enforcing the rules, and the only people left to put a stop to it are corrections officers.”

So how did it get to this point?

The motivation for privatizing prison food service is cost savings, and one common way that private food vendors save money is by reducing payroll expenses. That means some combination of fewer employees and a lower pay rate, and that means less oversight in the kitchen.

Trinity staffs as few as four employees in a kitchen for all shifts, officers say, and they often run double shifts. By comparison, the state staffed three employees and a supervisor in each kitchen for most shifts.

There's also an increased likelihood that gang members on the outside will work with gang members on the inside, and a great way to get inside is to work for a private food company with loose employment standards.

Officers say that the interview process involves two brief interviews. Trinity also provides its employees with far less training than the state's union kitchen employees who went to the corrections officers' academy to learn about prisoner management, use of force, self defense, and basic first aid and CPR.

“[State employees] knew what to expect, knew how to handle incidents, were trained in communications, went to the academy part-time, and had yearly training,” Taylor tells us. “These people are not trained; they're not experienced. Trinity is just going and hiring someone who works at Burger King, giving them the keys, and setting them loose.”

“Most of the [state] food service employees wouldn't allow any of this to go on. Those guys who worked for the state watched the kitchens like hawks, and if they saw somebody was doing something wrong, then they would go after them.”

Along with less training comes less pay. Trinity employees are paid \$13 an hour, compared to the starting wage of \$20 per hour that union employees received, Taylor says. One Trinity employee allegedly quit after employees were paid with Meijer gift cards.

“They're untrained, unseasoned, underpaid, and not very bright individuals off the street,” Drew says. “Then the MDOC is bypassing all of the rules and regulations associated with working inside of a correction facility. You get a lot of problems that way.”

<https://www.metrotimes.com/table-and-bar/archives/2018/05/23/prison-guards-michigan-is-deliberately-hiding-extent-of-prison-kitchen-horror-show>

[Detroit Metro Times](#)

What it's like to actually eat the food in Oakland County Jail

Mystery meat, bologna soup and maggots

By [Stephen Katz](#)



As they do every evening, hundreds of fruit flies perched on the dank tiled walls in the Oakland County Jail's showers look on as I step in to prepare dinner.

The roughly 6-by-4-foot enclosure is dimly lit by yellow, fluorescent light. The mildew is staggering.

Aside from serving as a fruit fly sanctuary, the shower serves multiple needs for hundreds of inmates daily. Even though it's filthy, it's where we scrub ourselves of the jail's filth. It's also where we do our laundry: Underwear and socks are agitated and scoured in five-gallon buckets also used to clean out the showers, then held up to the showerhead for a rinse.

Worse yet, it's the only place where a prisoner can find some privacy. And a few moments out of sight in the day of a sex-starved criminal lodged for months in the county jail leads to one thing.

The shower is also our stove. It's where we "cook" our commissary food, and in my hand is a clear, 20-ounce plastic cup filled halfway with pale brown, no-brand dehydrated refried beans. I hold the cup to the showerhead and fill it until the bean flakes are submerged. The beans need hot water to cook. Jail shower water is tepid at best, but regardless of the outcome in the stove, the beans are my ticket into that evening's "cook-up."

The cook-ups are a sort of potluck in which inmates pool ingredients purchased from commissary, which has a stock list similar to that of any crappy Eight Mile party store. But a party store offers better food than the Oakland County Jail cafeteria, and the cook-ups are essential. The "state" meals are painfully short on calories and taste, so each night we pile up mounds of junk food on chips or tortillas, creating sodium bombs packing the flavor and fill lacking on the state-issued trays.

My cook-up partner and friend, Chillin' P, who goes by this nickname despite his felonious assault rap that would be evidence against the moniker, is contributing semi-cooked and still mostly crunchy white rice along with a bag of pulverized Flamin' Hot Cheetos used for seasoning. Some dude who has the face of a classic cartoon thief brings tortillas, pickles, jalapenos, and squeeze cheese. These are the ingredients of a variation on the jail burrito — not much of a dazzler on this night, but it'll do.

For a moment in the shower I become very aware of what I'm doing and my surroundings. It's a harsh flash of reality. The scene is gross and depressing as I take a fruit-fly-on-the-wall look at myself: Me standing in a jail shower, a cup of dried refried beans held to a dirty showerhead. The din of dozens of inmates recreating in the dayroom on the other side of the shower curtain echoes through the cellblock. It's a stew of sad lives playing spades, Scrabble, chess, or watching *TMZ*. The only thing louder than them is the deputy yelling at them to shut the fuck up.

I smell the mildew and I see the staring and still fruit flies. I know I stand on an unfathomable amount of "pris jizz." I see the pile of old, wet socks the last prisoner who laundered in the shower left behind. A wave of despair hits, but retreats in an instant. The repulsiveness is shut out by the need to eat. Any germaphobe

hesitation disappears. Germs present less of a threat than hunger. My rumbling belly trumps all. In jail you've got to do what passes the time quicker. Hunger is a weight on the minute hand. And if standing in that dank horror chamber with a cup of dried beans is what gets me through, well

I pull the cup from the showerhead. Ten minutes later, the beans — now a scientifically impossible soggy yet crunchy paste — are presented to Chillin' P and thief face.

We break bread.

Tuna Coney

1 package tuna

1 package chili

1 package pickle

2 packages mustard

1 package saltine crackers

1 tortilla

Spread the tuna on the tortilla. Dice half a pickle. Crumble saltine crackers into a pile. Try to heat the chili. After failing, mix chili, pickle cubes, and add saltines for thickening. Pour chili mix over the tuna. Liberally apply mustard.

A convincing argument can be made that jail food should be pretty gross, but what it shouldn't be is rotten, maggot-infested, pulled out of the garbage, or gnawed on by rats. Unfortunately, that's exactly what it has been at times in Michigan's jails. Aramark, the company with which Oakland County and the Michigan Department of Corrections contracts for food service, seems intent on outdoing itself with each increasingly appalling headline. If you thought those maggots they served in Jackson last week were pretty gross, then check out the rotten chicken tacos they plopped on the plates in Kent County this week.

While OCJ has been spared the more gruesome issues, I still got a taste of Aramark's approach to feeding inmates during my seven-month stay in four different cellblocks, and it wasn't good. The media has been on them. Not only here, but also in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, New Jersey, and everywhere else where mouse turds or bugs or worms are turning up in prisoners' dinners.

Thankfully, I didn't read about the extent of it until after I got out.

In the days leading up to a sentencing I knew would leave me confined for much longer than preferable, I rounded my belly by licking plates clean at all my favorite restaurants. Chicken gyros from Plaka, deep-dish pizza from Loui's, burgers from Nemo's, cake after cake from Astoria.

As a teenage delinquent with a *Hollywood Knights*-style relationship with the local law, I had gotten acquainted with drunk-tank cuisine, so I figured I knew what to expect and would fatten up a little beforehand.

But as I waded into my protracted stay at the Oakland County Jail, it quickly became evident that I wasn't prepared for the daily culinary horror show. No one is asking the jail to polish the silver for a bunch of beer-bombing dolts and petty thugs. However — assuming they weren't serving actual trash that day, which is a legitimate worry in Michigan — there was no imagining the cartoonish menu items that would land in front of us, like bologna soup. There's no knowing ahead of time that "meatballs" in fluorescent gray sauce were actually the best thing rolling out of the kitchen and cause for excitement.

The problems with taste didn't compare to the sudden drop in caloric intake and persistent hunger. No one straight up starves in jail but, unless your people are putting money in your prisoner account so you can buy chips, candy, beef sticks, tuna, beans, or other ingredients to prepare food from commissary, you go hungry.

Within a week I dropped 11 pounds and within two weeks my ribs popped through as I shed another 10. Slices from Loui's and chicken gyros from Plaka danced and tumbled through my dreams. When my cellmate and I weren't bitching about our cases, we sat on our bunks and debated which restaurant in town stacked the tallest Rueben and one-upped each other's potato salad recipes.

The only person I ever met who gained weight in jail put on a shocking 20 pounds. By the looks of his pencil-thin frame, one would've guessed he had just lost 30.

"I was a meth addict before I came in," he explained over a bologna sandwich.

"He was on the stem-fast diet," another of his tribe chimed in.

Being hungry while confined in a monotonous existence places food in a whole new light. Surviving jail with your sanity intact is all about pushing the clock forward with as much joy as one can scrape together, and hunger — the kind that causes everyone in the room except meth addicts to drop 20 to 30 pounds — only slows time and cracks the spirit.

Meals become one of the few bright-ish spots in an otherwise dismal reality. There's nothing else from which to draw any pleasure, rest assured. So for those with money for commissary, cobbling together a tuna Rueben or assembling a junk food burrito the size of a football is an immense joy that can swing a day from miserable to tolerable by offering some delight and variation that, by design, is in very short supply.

Brighten enough days in that way and time might not seem to stand quite so still.

Food also becomes currency. You're pretty much illiterate and want someone to write a nice letter to your judge? Hand over a Honeybun. Need a barber to do something about your lid? The going rate is two bags of chips and a scoop of coffee. For those looking for a liquid lunch, someone always had "spud juice" made from fermented apples in their locker. A 20-ounce bottle runs \$5 worth of commissary items.

<https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/what-its-like-to-actually-eat-the-food-in-oakland-county-jail/Content?oid=2354552>

Prison food contractor hit with \$2M in penalties

Paul Egan, Detroit Free Press Published 11:35 a.m. ET Jan. 20, 2017 | Updated 5:03 p.m. ET Jan. 20, 2017

<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2017/01/20/prison-food-contractor-hit-2m-penalties/96824274/>

LANSING — Michigan's prison food contractor, Trinity Services Group, has been hit with penalties totaling just over \$2 million for inadequate staffing levels and other problems since the company started providing meals in September 2015, an official said Friday.

The penalties, first reported Thursday by Gongwer News Service, show significant problems persist with the privatization of prison food services, after the state ended a contract early to replace its first prison food contractor, Philadelphia-based Aramark Correctional Services.

Florida-based Trinity has been penalized \$905,750 for unauthorized meal substitutions, \$357,000 for delays serving meals, \$356,000 for inadequate staffing levels, and \$294,500 for sanitation violations, among other penalties, Corrections Department spokesman Chris Gautz said. Those penalties, which are assessed monthly, have all been imposed since about December 2015, when Trinity's grace period ended, he said.

"We feel that staffing is the biggest issue and that if staffing issues were resolved, the other issues would decrease," Gautz said. "This contract is working well, and obviously we are working with them to do everything we can to make it work even better."

Gautz said that through the end of December, the Corrections Department had issued 114 "stop orders," barring from prison property former Trinity employees fired for offenses such as over-familiarity with prisoners or smuggling of contraband. At the same point in the Aramark contract, the department had issued 159 stop orders to former Aramark employees, he said.

A call to Trinity seeking comment was not immediately returned Friday.

The penalties imposed on Trinity, which is more than a year into its three-year, \$158.8-million contract, far exceed those imposed on the previous contractor, Aramark, which replaced about 370 state kitchen workers, starting in December 2013. Aramark was subjected to one \$200,000 fine after an earlier \$98,000 fine was imposed, but later canceled.

But Gautz said that doesn't mean Trinity is doing a worse job than Aramark did. Corrections Department Director Heidi Washington, who took office in July 2015, found that Aramark could have been subject to an additional \$3.1 million in fines, which "for whatever reason" the previous administration under Director Dan Heyns had not imposed. Washington made it clear to Trinity from the start that penalties would be clearly spelled out in the contract and strictly enforced, Gautz said. "This is us holding them accountable for not meeting the commitments laid out in the contract that both parties had agreed to."

The Free Press published a series of articles on how the \$145-million contract with Aramark had been marked by problems with food shortages, sanitation issues and Aramark workers getting too friendly with prisoners — in some cases smuggling in drugs or other contraband or engaging in sex acts with prisoners. There also were inmate demonstrations and other unrest related to food issues.

Food provided by Trinity was among the complaints cited by inmates at Kinross Correctional Facility in a September disturbance that damaged the Upper Peninsula prison and cost the state nearly \$900,000. Gautz said Trinity is required to have 350 employees and currently has about 309, which represents an 88% staffing rate. About 17 prisons are staffed at 100% or better, but staffing levels at others are below 80%, he said. The state's Department of Talent and Economic Development is working with Trinity to try to increase the pool of potential employees the company can draw from, he said.

Michigan Department of Corrections, Trinity Services Group mutually agree to end contract

Posted: Wed 11:43 AM, Feb 07, 2018

LANSING, Mich. (WLUC) - The Michigan Department of Corrections will return to state-run food service operations this summer after coming to a mutual agreement with Trinity Services Group to end the partnership when the contract expires.

The change, which would bring about 350 state workers back to correctional facility kitchens, was announced in Gov. Rick Snyder's budget recommendation presentation Wednesday.

"As the contract with Trinity was approaching its end, we took the opportunity to re-examine our operations," Michigan Department of Corrections Director Heidi Washington said. "After discussing options with Trinity, it was determined it was in the best interest of both parties not to renew our agreement. We believe the department's needs would be better met by returning to state-run food service."

While food service contracts achieved savings for taxpayers, the MDOC determined that continued challenges with staffing vacancies, turnover, compliance with performance expectations, and a recent request by Trinity for additional funding, warranted a return to state-run operations.

The department's previous contract with Aramark started in December 2013 and ended in 2015.

About 320 Trinity food service workers are currently employed at Michigan correctional facility kitchens. The department's contract with Trinity Services Group expires July 31, 2018. Company leaders and the department agreed to end the partnership following discussions on Tuesday.

Budget language first approved in 2012 required the open bidding of food service operations to reduce correctional costs. The boilerplate language requiring the open bidding of food service is no longer in place, but the change would still require the Legislature to appropriate sufficient funds for these operations moving forward

Trinity Services Group Faces Complaints Due to Inadequate Prison and Jail Food

Loaded on June 8, 2018 by Edward Lyon published in Prison Legal News June, 2018, page 52

by Ed Lyon

<https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2018/jun/8/trinity-services-group-faces-complaints-due-inadequate-prison-and-jail-food/>

A tide of complaints has surfaced around Florida-based Trinity Services Group, one of the largest food service providers to correctional facilities in the nation. At issue is the provision of adequate, nutritious and healthy meals, since one study has found prisoners are six times more likely to contract a food-borne illness than non-prisoners. But prison safety is also a factor, considering that prisoners sometimes riot or protest due to poor food.

For example, describing their watered-down meals as "soupy," hundreds of Michigan prisoners at the Kinross Correctional Facility staged a hunger strike in March 2016 to protest the substandard food served by Trinity. Other strikes followed the next month, involving prisoners at the G. Cotton Correctional Facility and the Chippewa Correctional Facility. Another on May 24, 2016 involved over 700 prisoners at the Marquette Branch Prison.

The protests failed to improve Trinity's food service, however. A riot broke out at the Kinross prison in September 2016, in which poor food was a factor. Late in 2017, officials found maggots in three separate incidents at the Cotton facility, where prisoners also complained about "crunchy dirt" in potatoes. [See: PLN, Feb. 2017, p.48].

After switching in 2015 from Aramark, another major food service provider, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) fined Trinity \$3.8 million for staff shortages, unauthorized meal substitutions and other violations – including an incident in which prison kitchen workers were ordered by Trinity managers to sort a bag of rotting potatoes and discard just the maggot-infested ones.

Other problems included food stored at the wrong temperature, workers with expired food handler permits, storing food too close to restrooms, and not rinsing soap and cleaning chemicals from utensils. Around 180 Trinity employees were cited for misconduct, including smuggling contraband and having improper relationships with prisoners. [See: PLN, Jan. 2018, p.46].

The MDOC announced in February 2018 that it would bring prison food services back in-house, though the state agreed to pay Trinity \$35 million to continue providing meals and to let prison officials use its meal-tracking software during a one-year transition period.

Complaints also arose after Trinity took over food services at the Gordon County jail in Calhoun, Georgia in 2014. Prisoners reported in January 2015 that they fought hunger by licking syrup packets, eating toothpaste and drinking lots of water. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported the same month that some prisoners at the jail complained of weight loss. One prisoner filed repeated grievances consisting of one word: "Hungry." In a letter to county officials, the Southern Center for Human Rights noted that courts have held prisoners are entitled to "substantial and wholesome" meals.

Trinity charges \$1.772 for each meal at the Gordon County jail, where prisoners receive just two meals a day.

A riot broke out on November 19, 2016 at the El Paso County Criminal Justice Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado over the quality of food provided by Trinity, after county officials switched from Aramark earlier that year.

The following month, a Muslim prisoner at the jail filed a complaint claiming that Trinity refused to provide a halal diet – violating an American Correctional Association standard that specifies special diets are to be "provided for inmates whose religious beliefs require the adherence to religious dietary laws when approved by the facility chaplain." Another

El Paso County Criminal Justice Center prisoner, Ashley Peterson, said Trinity had failed to provide her with gluten-free meals for a month after she entered the jail, resulting in internal bleeding.

“Food allergies are not something you want to play with,” she said.

Indeed, there have been cases where prisoners have died due to corrections officials not accommodating food allergies. [See: PLN, Jan. 2016, p.54; April 2014, p.18].

With over \$500 million in annual revenue from serving 250 million meals to 470,000 prisoners in 44 states, Trinity submits bids for food service contracts at extremely low rates.

Weber and Davis counties in Utah contract with the company to provide meals at their jails. In 2015, Weber County signed a three-year, \$3,960,000 contract with Trinity for \$1.017 per prisoner meal. The following year, Davis County, north of Salt Lake City, signed a five-year contract with the food service firm for over \$1 million annually at \$1.10 to \$1.30 per meal.

Davis County received a report of prisoners being fed from brown bags emblazoned with the notation “not for human consumption.” Similar complaints were submitted from the jail in Weber County.

Weber County’s health department has substantiated complaints of moldy bread, a casserole infested with maggots or weevils, watered-down food, food with chunks of dirt and maggoty beans – though the health inspector opined the suspected maggots could have been bean seed embryos (he couldn’t say for sure because he never saw the actual meals).

However, Weber County sheriff’s deputy Kevin Burton said that “four complaints [of tainted food] in 2-1/2 years is a pretty good record,” adding that one of the ways quality is ensured is by having jailers eat some of the meals.

“You look at those companies, and they’re in it to make a profit,” said Tim Thielman, food service administrator at the Ramsey County Correctional Facility in St. Paul, Minnesota and the immediate past president of the Association of Correctional Food Service Affiliates. “I don’t want to talk bad about the companies, but it’s about money to them, and if there are ways that they can feed [prisoners] products that are lesser quality, [they will].”

The Ramsey County Correctional facility, where Thielman works, provides its own food service at a cost of about \$1.50 per prisoner per meal, or around \$4.50 a day.

“The problem with the privatization of anything in the prison context is that the market forces that we rely on in the rest of society don’t operate in prisons. There’s no consumer choice,” noted David Fathi, director of the ACLU’s National Prison Project. “If a prisoner doesn’t like the food, he can’t just go somewhere else and put the company out of business.”