



FRESH STARTS Act Hearing  
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety  
July 13, 2023

Good afternoon, Madam Chair Pinto and members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. My name is Winnie Huston, Food Policy Strategist for DC Greens, an organization that works to advance health equity in the District by building a just and resilient food system. I am here to support passage of the Food Regulation Ensures Safety and Hospitality Training Aids Reentry Transition and Success (FRESH STARTS Act) of 2023. This bill is a groundbreaking, comprehensive tool to transform the DC Department of Corrections' (DOC) food service program. DC currently holds nearly 1400<sup>1</sup> primarily Black<sup>2</sup> DC residents in its jail complex, where they are subjected to an inhumane and unhealthy food system. We must act now to change this system. Every person is entitled to be treated with dignity, no matter their status.

In 2021, DC Greens – in partnership with Don't Mute My Health, Friends and Family of Incarcerated People, and Impact Justice – hosted [a series of community conversations on DC Jail Food](#), which highlighted the inhumane meal program within DC jails and uplifted the voices of formerly incarcerated DC residents. Speakers shared firsthand accounts of how their physical and mental health significantly deteriorated during incarceration as a direct result of the food being served. They described food that was frequently rotten or unsafe to eat, and meals consisting primarily of refined carbohydrates and heavily processed meat. They also reported that water and food were routinely withheld as a means of punishment.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://doc.dc.gov/page/inmate-demographics-and-statistics>

<sup>2</sup> [True Justice: The Disturbing Truth about Incarceration in DC](#)



Within the past few days, ANC Commissioner 7F08, Leonard Bishop who is currently a resident in the DC Jail, received 294 responses (digital and written) from fellow residents about the food currently being served in the DC Jail. An initial review of the digital responses shows that conditions have not improved. Attached to my testimony is one survey pulled at random. We will forward all data to the Committee as soon as it is received from Commissioner Bishop.

It is unconscionable to treat our fellow citizens in this manner. The effects of poor nutrition and unsafe food in jails last much longer than the sentence – for the individual, their friends and family, and local taxpayers. Studies show that a lack of adequate nutrition contributes to poor behavior and diminished mental and physical health – this type of degradation not only harms those incarcerated, it also increases risk and stress for workers in the jails.<sup>3</sup> From a nutritional point of view, we can plainly see that the type of unhealthy food served in the DC Jail is the exact type of meal that health experts are constantly warning against. Unhealthy diets like those served to incarcerated residents are known to cause long-term increases in cholesterol and body fat, which can lead to a lifetime of diet-related, chronic health issues. Research shows that the medical costs associated with the treatment of chronic disease in DC is projected to average \$3.8 billion dollars per year by 2030.<sup>4</sup> We must do better to prevent additional burden on DC taxpayers and on our public healthcare system. Failure to provide healthy food to residents of the DC Jail system is a violation of basic

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<sup>3</sup> Maruschak, L. M., Brnson, J., & Alper, M. (2021). Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners and Jail Inmates. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. [https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/imhprpji1112\\_sum.pdf](https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/imhprpji1112_sum.pdf)

Binswanger, I. A., Krueger, P. M., & Steiner, J. F. (2009). Prevalence of chronic medical conditions among jail and prison inmates in the United States compared with the general population. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 63(11), 912–919.

<sup>4</sup> [District of Columbia | Keeping Education ACTIVE | Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease](#)



human rights and a violation of DC's promise to ensure racial equity in all government operations and practices.<sup>5</sup>

As this Committee considers this bill and looks to reform the food environment in DC DOC facilities, I encourage each member to take some time to thoroughly review the practices of the Maine Department of Corrections (MDOC). MDOC, which DC Greens and our partners had the pleasure of connecting with recently, employs the philosophy that if you treat people with respect, you get better outcomes. Correctional officers are trained in techniques that promote a non-adversarial relationship between themselves and residents while maintaining needed facility control, residents are fed nutritious food some of which is grown and cooked by residents, and there are workforce development programs to prepare residents for life outside the walls of the prison. Over the past five years, MDOC has gained the support of union employees due to the safer environment inside MDOC facilities (an approximate 90% reduction in assaults against correctional officers & between residents) and the support of state legislators and the Governor by reducing worker's compensation claims, hospital admissions, and overall medical costs for residents.<sup>6</sup>

The Maine model of corrections gives an example of what can be accomplished through the Healthy Food in DC Correctional Facilities Task Force, which will develop long-term mechanisms to promote a healthy and dignified food and wellness environment within the DC DOC. For example, DC DOC needs a hospitality career training program and employment support for residents upon release, to improve the quality of meals for residents, transition to a self-operated food service model, and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://ore.dc.gov/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/corrections/> Contact Maine Commissioner of Prisons, Randall Liberty [randall.liberty@maine.gov](mailto:randall.liberty@maine.gov) Reference testimony of Mark McBrine, Maine Department of Prisons [mark.mcbrine@maine.gov](mailto:mark.mcbrine@maine.gov)



include urban farms in plans for any new correctional facility. Our partners with the DC Good Food Purchasing Program will talk in more detail about some of these aspects.

Madam Chair, DC Greens stands ready to assist you, this Committee, and the Council in advocacy actions to support passage of this bill and its implementation. Thank you for your leadership on this issue.