

# Juvenile Voice

In this article, Judith Robbins, LCSW, JD, CCHP-A, talks with nutrition consultant Barbara Wakeen, MA, RD, CCHP, about nutritional issues specific to juvenile detention populations.

**JR:** *What are the special dietary needs of adolescents and how can corrections facilities meet these needs?*

**BW:** Adolescents require more calories, calcium, phosphorus and iron than most adult age groups. The key is to provide a balanced diet of adequate nutrients and calories.

In my experience and based on what I've learned from other corrections dietitians, most juveniles are receiving more than 3,000 calories per day, including snacks. Some facilities offer double entrees at lunch and dinner meals.

Many juvenile facilities participate in the USDA Child Nutrition National School Lunch Program/School Breakfast Program. These programs require certain food groups and quantities to be offered, along with some nutrient restrictions such as types and amounts of fats. Participants are also entitled to purchase commodity food items, which can help food budgets. Whether or not facilities participate, I have found that their meals are usually visually very balanced—that is, fruits and/or vegetables and milk at all meals.

Likewise, juveniles housed in adult facilities are usually recognized as having special nutritional needs and are served the adult menus augmented with milk, fruit and one or two snacks per day.

Unfortunately, even though nutritionally balanced meals are offered, adolescents often have not been exposed to some of the food served or dislike it and choose not to eat it. Thus, it can be challenging to ensure adequate intakes.

**JR:** *How can juvenile correctional facilities provide the most helpful guidance for kids with, or at risk of, obesity, diabetes and other conditions?*

**BW:** Classes, handouts and one-on-one counseling are good ways to provide education. The subject matter can address nutrition basics, therapeutic diets, activity, etc. Ideally, a registered dietitian is available to offer education, but most often the medical department performs that task.

Incorporating daily physical activity and structured exercise can also yield positive results for some kids at risk.

Educational agencies (including correctional facilities) that participate in the Child Nutrition Program are required to establish a school wellness policy that applies to all juveniles, not just those at risk. This is somewhat akin to NCCHC standards in their proactive stance for health during and after incarceration. Information on the wellness policy requirements can be found at [www.fns.usda.gov/TN/Healthy/wellness\\_policyrequirements.html](http://www.fns.usda.gov/TN/Healthy/wellness_policyrequirements.html).

**JR:** *Registered dietitians are in short supply in many juvenile systems. When an RD is not on staff, how can professionals collaborate to improve dietary choices for kids?*

**BW:** RDs write and approve menus based on state regulations, accreditation standards, facility policy and other guidelines (e.g., the USDA Child Nutrition Program) with which the facilities must comply. However, unless we are there to monitor, we cannot guarantee the outcomes.

Start by reviewing the various requirements noted above. Look at what is offered in commissaries and vending machines, if these are available to the juveniles. Look at trends in weight gain, food waste, health and behavioral issues. Meet with the food service director to address any problems you find. If there is cause for concern, this can validate the need for a visit or consult from the RD to assist in modifications for compliance or healthier menu options. Ultimately, the RD will have to approve any menu changes.

**JR:** *Do you have any suggestions for maintaining healthy diets while managing tightening budgets?*

**BW:** Although it's not always popular with the kids, strive to omit or reduce "empty calories," such as candy, cookies, cake, soda pop or other calorie-dense, low-nutrient foods.

**JR:** *Most juvenile settings have a diverse population with very different food preferences. Do you have any advice about whether these preferences should be reflected in the menus?*

**BW:** Most correctional facilities in the United States do not honor personal food preferences in terms of likes and dislikes. I am in agreement with this. That said, standard menu planning usually does factor in preferences according to population demographics. Some accreditation standards require food preference surveys. Facilities use this information to incorporate popular foods on cycle menus when possible or to omit unpopular foods. Meal participation and plate waste are also indicators of food popularity.

Foods usually popular with juveniles are incorporated into menus that offer a variety of other foods that may be less popular but are nutrient dense. This approach results in healthy menus that introduce new foods into the diet.

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