

Prisoners Complain of Maggots 'Falling Out of Food'

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Maggots in food, staffing shortages and reports of running out of foods are among new complaints facing the vendor that won the contract to feed Ohio inmates.

Reports obtained by The Associated Press through records requests found numerous problems reported since April, when the state took the rare step of fining the vendor because of contract failures.

The records show 65 instances where Philadelphia-based Aramark Correctional Services failed to provide food or ran out of it — usually the main course, such as hamburgers or chicken patties — while serving inmates, leading to delays and in some cases security concerns as inmates grew frustrated. Substitute items were provided in most cases.

On May 28, guards stopped breakfast "to preclude a mass demonstration" at Warren Correctional Institution in southwest Ohio by inmates upset at being served only white bread and peanut butter after the supply truck was apparently late.

The records also show several days when Aramark employees simply failed to show up and cases of unauthorized relationships between inmates and Aramark workers. Reports allege sexual activity between some inmates and workers.

Records also show five reports of maggots since January in food or the preparation process. Last month, for example, an Aramark employee notified a prison guard at Trumbull Correctional Institution that "one of the two serving lines had maggots falling out of the warming tray."

A report by the local health department called the incident isolated and said the Aramark supervisor followed necessary steps to ensure food safety.

At issue is a bigger national debate over privatizing prison services — from food preparation to the running of entire facilities — to save money at a time of squeezed state budgets. Proponents say private industry can often do the job more efficiently and more cheaply, unencumbered by union and administrative rules, while opponents say a focus on the bottom line leads to cutting corners that creates danger for inmates and employees.

Aramark called the complaints "an ongoing political and media circus about anti-privatization" of prisons, saying it had never had such claims about its operations in more than 500 correctional facilities.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

"We continue to make steady progress in managing the operational issues," spokeswoman Karen Cutler said in an email. "The number of issues continues to decline."

Aramark's \$110 million deal to feed some 50,000 Ohio prisoners began in September and runs through June 30, 2015.

The state fined the company \$142,000 in April, saying it had failed to meet promised staffing levels, among other problems.

"Food service is a critical operation and we have made clear to Aramark our concerns," said JoEllen Smith, spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

It's difficult to compare food service before and after Aramark since the agency didn't track incidents internally before, she said. The state investigated occasional reports of maggots or food running short before Aramark, Smith said.

The agency is inspecting all prisons and asking local health departments for independent reviews at some, she said. Aramark is also having an outside company review procedures, Smith said.

Ninety-six Aramark employees are banned from working in Ohio prisons, 20 more than when the fine was levied, according to prison documents.

Cutler said safety is improved because Aramark employees breaking the rules are dismissed immediately, compared with a lengthy grievance process for union members before the contract.

The prison employees union has filed a formal grievance over the Aramark contract. It said it offered a competitive proposal to keep food service in-house. It disputes the notion a pre-Aramark comparison wasn't possible, saying problems were documented, with prison employees disciplined for failing to meet standards.

"The number of incidences are not decreasing. If anything, they're increasing," said Sally Meckling, spokeswoman for the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association.

In Michigan, Gov. Rick Snyder says he may reconsider Aramark's three-year, \$145 million contract with the prison system, citing issues with the company's performance, including about 30 inmates having symptoms consistent with food poisoning.

Aramark said it was told last week that the state couldn't find a connection between those reports and its food preparation. Messages were left with the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Source URL (retrieved on 04/18/2015 - 8:00am):

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

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