Putting values on our plates:
Reimagining food in public institutions

This issue brief on institutional food was written by **Joshna Maharaj,** a chef, activist and scholar whose work in hospitals and schools has helped reimagine the role of food in public institutions. Many of these insights and reflections build on themes explored in her book, *Take Back the Tray*, which chronicles her efforts to bring dignity, nourishment and justice to institutional food systems in Canada.

The story of institutional food: how we got here

Any plate of food, served anywhere, reflects the attitude and values that produced that plate.

When you're in an award-winning, fine dining restaurant, you can safely expect to be served food that is prepared with expert skill. When you've just returned home from work and someone has already started cooking dinner, you know that you're getting a meal that comes with some care and affection. The dismal trays of reheated food served in many hospitals, schools and prisons tell a different story.

It's not a big revelation to say institutional food could be better. Hospital food is famously criticized—studies in Canadian hospitals show that only a fraction of meals meet nutritional standards and patient satisfaction remains low.[1,2] Chronic student hunger has become so normalized that it is often treated as a rite of passage, with research revealing widespread food insecurity across Canadian campuses.[3,4,5] In prisons, meals are frequently described as part of the punishment, with evidence that food is used as a tool of control and deprivation.[6,7] And while there are countless well-intentioned folks working in institutions everywhere doing the very best they can with what they've got, the meals generally remain low in flavour and rely heavily on highly processed ingredients purchased at the lowest possible price. Many institutional kitchens have become little more than storage spaces, with most food housed in massive freezers and prepared using reheating units.

One of the most important lessons I learned from my work in institutions is that it wasn't always this way.

At one hospital in Toronto, there is a wood-panelled fridge with sharp hooks that used to hang sides of beef for butchering on-site, and the staff recalled a time when that kitchen prepared fresh rolls every day and had five cooks just to prepare vegetables. When I was there in 2011, that fridge was used exclusively to chill and set Jell-O.

The wisdom here is that we once chose to serve fresh, scratch-made food on institutional plates, and at some point we made different choices—choices that reflect a cultural shift in values and priorities. Stemming from a slow death by a thousand budget cuts and of the tone set by governments, at some point in our history we decided that it was simply too expensive to pay a real human being to stand at a kitchen counter and prepare fresh meals, on-site, from scratch, every day. The result is an institutional culture that often does not prioritize nourishment, let alone the people eating the food.

Suggested citation: Maharaj, J. 2025. *Putting Values on Our Plates: Reimagining Food in Public Institutions.* Issue brief prepared for the Arrell Food Institute. Guelph, ON: Arrell Food Institute.

More than just meals: the culture behind the food

Our institutions are in some way a reflection of who we are as a society.

We built these institutions. Ideally, they are the houses that hold our collective values and serve our communities. Consequently, if institutions don't do this, it's our job to fix them. What I have found during my work in schools and hospitals is that the problem with institutional food is not actually the food, it's the attitudes and values that are currently guiding the institutional food service. When food is treated as an afterthought, it's because institutional systems prioritize budget efficiency, fiscal responsibility, profit generation and contract compliance over care and nourishment.

What we need is a major culture change. We need institutions to bring health, humanity and hospitality back to food while also supporting sustainability, local economies and the dignity of frontline staff. This isn't about finding a new supplier and some fresh recipes; this is about changing habits and mindsets.

Promising cases

Encouragingly, there are examples across Canada that show what's possible when food is treated as a priority:

- **In healthcare settings,** Nourish's Food is Our Medicine program guides health care providers on including culturally minded food options and Indigenous foodways in menus.[8]
- **In prisons,** resistance to the Food Services Modernization Initiative—which sought to centralize federal prison food prep at five regional hubs, with meals reheated on site —highlights how food can become a site of rehabilitation and cultural connection rather than punishment.[9]
- **At the policy level,** federal investments in the rollout of Canada's National School Food Policy are creating infrastructure and standards that support local procurement and scratch cooking in schools.[10,11]

These cases prove that transformation is possible—and that when we prioritize people over convenience, institutional food can nourish bodies, communities and economies.

Institutions are complex systems.

Changing one part—much like changing a recipe—often means rethinking many others. The story below about getting real, fresh potatoes on patient trays illustrates the deep interconnectedness of institutional food systems, and what it takes to make changes.

While this was certainly a frustrating process to endure, it was also an illuminating one and taught me so much about the systems I was trying to change.

Process of putting real, fresh potatoes on the menu for hospital patients:

1. Used personal funds to purchase local potatoes

2. Brought in personal equipment to use for preparation

3. Negotiated the volume of oil and salt to use for seasoning with the dietician team

4. Filled an organics waste bag for the first time in years and had to establish proper disposal procedures

5. People in the offices nearby smelled the cooking and wondered what was going on

6. We got those potatoes on the tray!

Investing in food systems is investing in ourselves

Speaking of change, how do we work towards that?

While there are some promising cases, in all the work I've done and conversations I've had, it always seems to come down to the same thing: food is still not seen as a priority by many of the people with the power to make meaningful change. There is a persistent gap in our collective understanding about the role that good food plays in supporting health and well-being, education and rehabilitation. If we truly understood how vital it is to invest in our food systems and, ultimately, ourselves, we wouldn't continue to treat it as a low priority.

In many ways, the story of institutional food is a story of deep disconnection: between people and their food, between values and practice, and between what we know is possible and what we've come to accept.

How do we prioritize putting values back onto our plates?

There are several ways public institutions can accomplish this, such as making sure food is:

- Wholesome, affordable and delicious.
- Deeply nourishing, with seasonal menus.
- Made from scratch, on-site every day.
- Made with thought and care by skilled workers in dignified, secure jobs.
- Made with organic ingredients that are locally produced.
- Reflective of the cultural diversity of the community the food is served in.
- Accessible for people with health, choice and culture-based dietary restrictions.
- Sourced via transparent, fair and just procurement networks.
- A vitally necessary part of the high standard of care and service offered in the institution.

Call to action

Each and every one of these changes has the potential to drastically improve the way we serve food in public institutions and in turn support optimum opportunities for healing, growth and rehabilitation. But the most important shift that needs to happen before any progress will be made is the prioritization of people—from the people responsible for growing, preparing and serving the food to the people who eat the food.

If people aren't our priority, then we must reassess our values.

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