

Memorandum



Date: September 25, 2015

To: Honorable Chairman Jean Monestime
and Members, Board of County Commissioners

From: Carlos A. Gimenez
Mayor 

Subject: Faith-Based Meals

Pursuant to your memorandum, dated September 4, 2014, below please find information regarding faith-based meals:

Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department (MDCR) is committed to meeting the religious needs of all inmates and works with local religious leaders, through the Departmental Chaplains, to provide religious instruction and consultation on religious-based issues, including faith-based meals.

- In August 2014, MDCR conducted a review of the faith-based meal policy and procedures following a sudden and significant increase in the request for kosher meals.
 - Persons requesting kosher meals went from a historical average of 35 to an all-time high of 794 in the month of September 2014, increasing such meal requests by over 2000 percent and resulting in the provision of over 2,380 kosher meals daily.
 - The increase became cost-prohibitive as kosher meals are 177 percent more costly than general population meals. If the trend had continued, MDCR would have incurred additional expenses of approximately one (1) million, on an annual basis.
 - The increase also proved unsustainable due to space and heating option limitation. The review identified that this increase in the requests for kosher meals, widely accepted to be prepared in accordance with standards that exceed those applicable to Halal, stemmed from a growing number of inmates professing to follow the Muslim faith
- MDCR included Imam Nassirnia, who has served MDCR's Muslim inmates for several years, in its review of the meal requirements of those inmates professing to adhere to the Islamic faith.
 - Imam Nassirnia informed MDCR that the meals served to the general population and the alternative vegetarian meal offered to inmates are Halal-compliant, meaning that they meet the religious dietary needs of practicing Muslims.
- As of October 1, 2014, MDCR began transitioning followers of the Islamic faith to the general population meals based on the fact that such meals complied with Halal. Followers of the Islamic faith were also able to request, as all inmates are, the vegetarian meal option.
 - Prior to the October 1, 2014 effective date, inmates were notified of the upcoming change and given an opportunity to discuss their faith-based concerns with the Imam.
- On May 21, 2015, MDCR met with the members of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) to discuss their concerns related to the religious meal accommodation.
 - CAIR was advised of the new policy, as well as the guidance and approval MDCR received from Imam Nassirnia prior to its implementation.
- On July 20, 2015, in response to issues raised by CAIR, MDCR completed its benchmark research of other Florida correctional agencies to determine their inmate religious meal accommodations.
 - Of the 11 responding correctional agencies, including Broward County, City of Jacksonville, Orange County, Palm Beach County, Polk County, and St. Lucie County, none offer Halal meals.
 - Many of the agencies offer a vegetarian meal as the only alternative for all inmates making faith-based meal requests.

- A significant factor in the inability for MDCR to provide Halal meals is the space and layout of the current food services operation. MDCR anticipates relocating to a new kitchen for meal preparation by December 2016. At that time, MDCR will be in a better position to re-assess the financial and operational feasibility of adding a Halal meal and/or reducing the faith-based meal options to "vegetarian-only," as is consistent with other Florida correctional agencies.
- MDCR advised CAIR of the above information. MDCR has also requested CAIR's assistance in identifying additional Imams to serve as volunteers for the Muslim inmates. CAIR refused to provide the requested assistance.
- MDCR was advised of the lawsuit filed by CAIR, and has met with the County Attorney's Office (CAO). The lawsuit is currently being defended by the CAO.

Questions regarding the constitutional rights of incarcerated persons to receive faith-based meals should be directed to the CAO. Should you have any questions or need further information concerning MDCR faith-based meals, please contact Marydell Guevara, Director, Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department, at (786) 263-6010, or me directly.

- c: Russell Benford, Deputy Mayor, Office of the Mayor
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