

Values-Aligned Food Purchasing and Service

Promising Examples from US Federal Agencies and Programs

Executive Summary | July 2023

The federal government purchases over \$8 billion worth of food annually. Federal facilities serve food to millions of federal employees including military and civilian personnel; people who are incarcerated; people receiving healthcare services at Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals and Indian Health Services facilities; and visitors to national parks, museums, and other attractions. The magnitude of this reach and purchasing power presents both a responsibility and an opportunity for the federal government to advance health, racial justice, local economies, and climate priorities. This document summarizes an accompanying report of promising examples of federal agencies that are working to embed values into their food service operations or purchasing programs.¹

National Park Service

The Healthy Food Choice Standards and Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines inform the creation and implementation of food service concessions contracts across National Park Service properties. The Healthy Food Choice Standards require concessioners to meet minimum requirements for healthy menu options; food preparation practices (e.g., healthy portion sizes, offering non-fried options); and education and labeling. Per the standards, the menu must offer a fruit or vegetable with all entrées, low-fat dairy options, and beverages without added sugar. Concessioners operating these facilities are also obligated to provide two core meals (one vegetarian and one non-vegetarian) that meet additional health standards. The voluntary Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines support concessioners in procuring and labeling foods from more sustainable sources, including sustainable seafood; fair trade coffee; organic foods; seasonal, locally or regionally produced foods; and animal products raised without added hormones or antibiotics.

Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DoD) has made strides towards serving healthier foods at its dining facilities through several mechanisms. From the procurement side, each service branch has published a Food Buyer's Guide which specifies nutrition and quality criteria for foods that can be offered in dining facilities. The DoD Menu Standards also inform which menu items are offered on master menus, outlining detailed requirements for each food group around serving size, variety, cooking preparation, and nutrient requirements. The standards support the use of a traffic light system that categorizes how nutritious the food is, from the most nutritious foods (green), to be consumed daily to least nutritious (red), to be consumed on special occasions. Some individual food service operations go a step further, pairing these mandatory health-focused menu improvements with the increased availability and labeling of plant-forward and climate-friendly menu options.

The Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh) allows school districts and tribal organizations to purchase local fruits and vegetables through DoD supply channels and infrastructure. California schools have also been able to procure organic produce via DoD Fresh, facilitated by a partnership between the state Department of Education and Friends of the Earth launched in 2021.

Smithsonian Institution

The Smithsonian Institution uses the cafés on its premises to implement and educate about mission-aligned food procurement and service practices. Beyond general priorities including healthy choices and supporting the sustainability goals of the Institution, some museums incorporate additional features unique to the mission of each museum.

¹ References and additional details pertaining to this summary can be found in the full length report, available at bit.ly/ValuesAlignedFoodPurchasingReport.

The Museum of the American Indian has been awarded for its incorporation of Indigenous and seasonal foods of North America. The Museum of African American History and Culture prominently features foods and food preparation techniques of historical and cultural significance to African Americans. Meanwhile, the Museum of Natural History practices local and sustainable sourcing, offers plant-forward menu items, and engages in waste reduction and composting efforts.

Bureau of Prisons

The Bureau of Prisons has worked to incorporate healthier options through instituting a monthly national menu across its facilities. Given the growing demand for options that meet religious needs and personal preferences, the BOP added a “no flesh” or vegetarian entrée into every lunch and dinner on the national menu. The vegetarian offerings are notable in that they reflect a diversity of plant-based options with a large emphasis on pulses (e.g., beans, lentils) and legumes (e.g., tofu). While the BOP has made strides towards improving its food offerings, the national menu and “no flesh” menu items are not necessarily offered or optimally executed by all facilities in practice. Further work is needed to ensure healthy, sufficient, and high quality food is actualized for all. It’s also important to recognize that providing healthier and better quality foods in prisons is only one step towards harm reduction while our country works to address the much larger issue of mass incarceration.

Veterans Health Administration

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has advanced a series of sustainable and healthy food service strategies through changing its purchasing, menu design, and operational practices. Required as part of its broader Food Service Management Directive, the VHA Healthy Diet Guidelines outline evidence-based healthy food standards alongside recommendations for environmentally sustainable sourcing for inpatient meals. The VHA leverages its purchasing power through its Subsistence Prime Vendor Contract with US Foods to purchase values-aligned products, such as meat, poultry, and fish raised without antibiotics. Individual facilities are also encouraged to establish contracts with local vendors for fresh produce, dairy, and bread. The VHA completed a four-week long plant-based recipe pilot in early 2023 with preliminary results indicating positive consumer reception. The VHA has also advanced more sustainable operational practices ranging from reducing and diverting food waste to onsite gardens.

Conclusion

This summary and the [full-length report](#) highlight the feasibility and benefits of implementing aspects of values-aligned food purchasing and service in a variety of federal facilities. Several agencies have made progress in implementing nutrition standards and serving more climate-friendly, plant-forward items. Some have also prioritized ingredients that are locally sourced, organic, fair trade, or (for animal products) raised without routine use of antibiotics. Key factors that have enabled this progress include focusing on increasing rather than restricting choice, having dedicated champions and valuable external partnerships, and advancing changes to agency policies and prime vendor catalogs.

While this progress is laudable, it is insufficient to drive the changes urgently needed in our food system to improve health outcomes, address climate change, advance racial equity, support a valued workforce, and strengthen local economies. A robust, enduring, whole-of-government policy is needed to fully leverage federal purchasing power to transform the food system. To that end, the Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition is calling on President Biden to issue an Executive Order to update and implement the *Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities* and establish values-aligned food purchasing standards for federal agencies.

The Federal Good Food Purchasing Coalition is working to leverage federal food purchasing to spur a just, healthy, and sustainable food system. For more information, visit www.fedgoodfoodpurchasing.org.

