

Opinion

Broome's new food contracts another bad move

Your Turn

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Guest Columnists

In September 2015, local food workers, social service providers and community organizers packed a county legislature meeting in protest. Their aim: to reverse the county's plan to outsource food preparation for the county jail and Willow Point Nursing Home to an out-of-state corporation.

To let profits determine basic food service, protesters argued, courted disaster.

Complaints from Willow Point soon grew and became public: food was cold, inadequate and delivered late. Recently, the county finally announced it was terminating its contract with Aramark. It was a wise decision.

What comes next is likely not.

The county now proposes to contract with the French firm Sodexo for feeding elderly and disabled residents at Willow Point, and with Florida-based Trinity Corp. for those in the county jail. It appears the same abuses will be repeated. Sodexo has the contract for Binghamton University, where complaints over high prices, low part-time wages and poor service are common. Unlike BU students, our vulnerable seniors at Willow Point cannot go to an alternative.

Even more vulnerable are those in the county jail, filled as it is with hundreds of unconvicted persons (persons without a conviction or sentence), most of whom are there only because they cannot afford our high local bails for nonviolent charges. Publicly available news reports and state investigations tell chilling stories about how the incarcerated will fare. In Michigan, where Trinity replaced a disastrous experiment with Aramark as well, the firm was fined

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\$3.7 million for failing to provide even the most basic food. Trinity workers smuggled in contraband and had sexual relations with prisoners. Hunger strikes and riots spread across the state system. In Colorado, hunger led to a riot, and in Georgia, prisoners in Trinity-run facilities resorted to eating toothpaste and syrup packets.

Next month, Michigan's Republican governor is returning to state-run kitchens. Broome would be wise to do the same, returning jobs to local workers and permitting direct, local oversight.

Past and current county executives and legislators refuse this option, stating that we can't afford it and need cheaper food and lower labor costs. A much more effective way to contain county spending would be to cut the radically increasing corrections budget. In recent years, we have spent \$7 million on an unnecessary jail expansion (built to house 600 persons, with now less than 430 county prisoners) and hired over a dozen new corrections officers — while cutting back on community health facilities and funding. This makes little fiscal sense given that 80 percent of those in the jail struggle with mental health and addiction issues, and return to us without long-term treatment options.

Our elderly, disabled and incarcerated all need basic services. To give monopoly contracts to private, profit-driven corporations, with little or no public oversight, risks repeating expensive, past mistakes. We deserve better.

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