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INMATES

Muslim Prisoners Win Right to Diet Equality

By **JULI S. CHARKES**

MUSLIM inmates at the Westchester County Jail in Valhalla have won the right to be served a diet that includes meat prepared in accordance with their faith, under a settlement reached with the county last month.

Judge [Richard M. Berman](#) of Federal District Court in Manhattan approved the settlement, which stipulates the county's obligation to serve Muslim prisoners halal meat — prepared in accordance with Islamic law — up to four times a week. That frequency matches the number of times kosher meals have long been served to Jewish prisoners, the settlement says.

Inmates' religious and equal protection rights became the impetus for a cluster of federal lawsuits filed by Muslim prisoners against the county's Department of Correction almost three years ago, said Richard B. Cohen, a lawyer who represented eight of the inmates.

Under the agreement, the county was not found in violation of inmates' rights but agreed to provide the requisite number of special meals. Mr. Cohen said that satisfied the objective of his clients' actions, which was to bring parity between offerings of kosher and halal-based meals.

County officials had argued that a price discrepancy between a regular meal and one containing halal meat created an unreasonable financial burden for Westchester.

At the start of the litigation in 2005, a meal containing halal meat would have cost the jail about \$4 a serving, compared with \$1.50 for a regular meal, said Christie L. D'Alessio, a lawyer for the county. The price differential is now only about 50 cents, she said.

The county regularly pays the increased cost of a kosher meal, which is about \$4 a meal. But with almost three times as many Muslim as Jewish inmates at any given time — there are currently about 110 Muslim and 37 Jewish inmates in a total population of 1,500 — budgetary constraints were an important consideration, Ms. D'Alessio said. She also said that while "we've always held that religious beliefs are important," halal meat "was very hard to secure."

Instead of serving prisoners regular meat that was in violation of their faith, prison officials regularly provided nonmeat items like eggs, macaroni and cheese and veggie burgers, she said.

She said that the increased availability of halal meat had helped persuade county officials to begin serving the special meat regularly in September and subsequently to agree to the terms of the settlement. The county has contracted with a New Jersey food vendor, Mil-Ray Food, to provide the halal meat.

"This is a really a win-win for everybody that saves taxpayers money and that presents a minimal cost to give these inmates something that they feel is necessary and that is important in terms of religious needs being met," Ms. D'Alessio said.

John Nashid, the jail's imam, or Islamic spiritual leader, said the change in available diet had already had a positive effect on tensions he had witnessed over the issue of religion and diet.

"We're a country that is founded on religious freedom and respect for human life," he said, "so the fact that the end result of this case is that there has been justice and equality accorded to these guys is a victory."

Julio Rosa, 37, one of the plaintiffs, was released from Valhalla last May after federal drug-trafficking charges were dropped. Reached at his home in Delaware, Mr. Rosa, who was raised a Roman Catholic, said he had turned to Islam once he was jailed as a pretrial detainee.

While in jail, Mr. Rosa went on a three-week hunger strike to protest meals he said he was served that contained non-halal meat, violating his faith.

“I fought for anyone else who comes after,” Mr. Rosa said. “As long as the new brothers get what they deserve, then that’s a victory, that’s what shows the glory of God.”

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