

A 12-STEP PROCESS:

IMPROVING FOOD QUALITY AT ALLEN MEMORIAL HOSP.

Kathleen Niedert, who heads up foodservices at Allen Memorial Hosp. in Waterloo, IA, happens to believe that hospital food can't take a backseat to fine dining prep or techniques any more.

"Hospitals may be missing the boat if they're not looking closer at the great opportunities for hiring chefs and great cooks from the hospitality industry," she points out. "We offer

essentially the same wages—and certainly better hours and benefits."

That's why last year, Niedert embarked on a 2-year plan to put quality at the center of Allen Memorial's foodservice efforts.

Last September, she hired two production staff with hospitality experience instead of quantity-cooking background. "I scoured the local restaurants to find the best people

before making my selection."

A total makeover: But the program went beyond hiring-from-the-outside, she points out. The "total makeover" at Allen Memorial includes "recharging" her staff of 34 FTEs, who are responsible for preparing 42,000 meal-equivalents a month for patients, cafeteria customers, special functions and vending foods.

She also hired rent-a-chef Don

Miller to "show us the latest techniques in upscale catering for one week, and a second to train the staff in what it takes to improve food quality at our facility."

"What has evolved from my various rent-a-chef assignments around the country is a 12-step process," chef Don points out. "The idea is to present these techniques to the entire team and get everyone to buy into the process."

The 12 steps: Following, a quick recap of Miller's 12-step process to improving foodservice quality.

Get motivated and on track:

1 "It doesn't do any good to simply order your staff to produce quality food that looks and tastes great," Miller says. "Even if you gave them perfect recipes and procedures, it usually doesn't work. You have to teach them why you need to do it, how—and what's in it for them."

That's the buy-in, he points out. "The fad really needs to be the cheerleader and sparkplug to get things rolling." He cites recent efforts at St. Agnes Medical Ctr. in Fresno, CA and Allen Memorial as two examples of team-motivating that works.

2 **Make flavor/appearance a priority:** "In most facilities I visit or consult, I've noticed that few have figured out what the most important function is. And that is: that this is the foodservice business. Our job is to manufacture quality food and service."

Once this becomes the main objective, Miller says, then the entire f/s team has to make producing quality foods its top priority.

3 **Taste food daily:** Develop standards and insure they're consistently followed. "If quality food is the priority, then food needs to be tested every day," he insists.

Stanford Univ. Hosp. in California gathers its dietitians, managers and cooks at 10:45 every morning for a

group-taste-test, for example. "If something's wrong, the idea is to do something to fix it on-the-spot...or longer-term."

Three typical excuses for not testing: (1) "It has too many calories," (2) "It will spoil my lunch," (3) "We've made it this way for 30 years—no need to taste it."

4 **Build your culinary know-how:** "If you're tasting food and finding problems, you need to know how-to-fix-it. Most managers aren't trained chefs and they need to build their culinary know-how—through options like rent-a-chef programs, culinary workshops, etc."

5 **Don't overcook, use timers:** "And don't forget temperature probes, especially with meats," he says. "The single most devastating enemy of quality meats is overcooking. Almost everybody today overcooks. For example, it takes just 17 mins. to cook a frozen boneless, skinless chicken breast at 300°F in a convection oven—but I have yet to find someone who's doing it right. In fact, most have little or no idea of just how long they're cooking meats."

6 **Avoid cooking too far ahead:** Miller says he frequently finds the entire lunch meal cooked-off by 10 a.m.

"This can be a real problem for those items that deteriorate in quality during the holding process."

Examples of vulnerable foods: Boneless skinless chicken breast and baked

fish, which should be among the last items prepared and cooked. Another problem: Making holding temperatures too hot, allowing the meat to continue cooking and dry out.

7 **Monitoring is everyone's business:** "This doesn't necessitate written documented quality control monitors—but quick visual and sensory checks by everyone."

"Even cafeteria servers on the line should check food quality and raise a red flag if something doesn't look or taste right. Gravy may have been perfect when it was prepared, but may thicken in the holding pans. It needs to be thinned to maintain quality."

8 **Pay attention to details:** Foodservice is a detail business, Miller points out.

"It means paying attention to thousands of them continually—those who do will be successful."

9 **Know when brands make a difference:** "All brands or products are not equal.

This is especially apparent in chicken/beef bases and spices. It's not always wise to buy the least-expensive bases and spices since these products provide the flavor foundation for so many of our recipes."

Tip: If the primary (first) ingredient in a base is either salt, dextrin (sugar) or maltodextrin (sugar), "you probably bought what is considered a low-end base product. You can't produce quality flavor with low-end bases and spices."

10 **Balance the workload:** That also involves simplifying the work and balancing scratch vs. convenience food-prep, Miller says. "With all the staffing cutbacks, production crews today are scrambling for their lives. This requires balancing the work so that everyone does a fair share."

11 **Keep daily logs:** They should be maintained by section (i.e., patient tray service, catering, cafeteria and production) and kept in a convenient location so that it can be reviewed "and initialed by every associate before starting the day's work schedule."

Tip: "It should contain information regarding changes and quality improvements—like, please be sure to use the parsley garnish for breakfast trays, effective May 21, 1993. The garnish is located in refrigerator #2 and prepared by position #6."

12 **Hold weekly team meetings:** Discuss the "process" and focus on what's been done during the week to improve food quality/appearance. "What gets talked-about gets improved...try to pick the least stressful time and day for the meeting. Remember, 15 mins. is better than nothing."

For more information, contact chef Don Miller at 619-691-8927, 136 Ranier Ct., Chula Vista, CA 91911.