



Mt. Sinai Hospital nutrition services weathers the coronavirus crisis

The dining team at New York City's Mt. Sinai Hospital served not only in-house patients but also sent meals to the temporary tent hospital across the street in Central Park.



The coronavirus crisis hit every community in the United States, but none more heavily than the New York City area, putting the city's hospitals in the eye of the storm. Among these was the Mt. Sinai Hospital, located next to Central Park between 98th and 102nd Streets in Manhattan. Retail and patient dining services at Mount Sinai are operated by Compass One Healthcare, which faced not only feeding COVID-positive patients but also the busy, stressed staff.

If that weren't enough of a challenge, Mt. Sinai also found itself located directly across 5th Avenue from the temporary Samaritan's Purse tent hospital established in Central Park to treat COVID patients, and the dining team was charged with sending meals three times a day to that ad hoc facility (which closed down in early May).

Meanwhile, the hospital itself suspended taking non-emergency patients and barred visitors, both of which impacted patient and retail meal counts. The main cafeteria was restricted to staff only and offered only takeout food. In fact, the seating area was converted to office space for hospital staff as part of an attempt to distance workers from each other in Mt. Sinai's constricted campus footprint.

Nothing normal

Overseeing dining operations at Mt. Sinai is Pat Ortlieb, senior director of food & nutrition services for Compass One Healthcare, who says her biggest challenges were reassuring staff and ensuring everyone stayed as safe as possible while the team undertook the operational adjustments needed to deal with the situation.

"We started by sticking with our normal plan with just some units having COVID patients, but it quickly became apparent that we were going to just be overwhelmed," she says. "Our beautiful lobby, which looks like it should be on a TV show, became a patient area, so we quickly realized there was no way we were going to continue in a normal environment."

It was time for quick thinking and improvisation.

"One thing we found is that the emergency menu we keep as part of our regulatory requirement didn't really work for us because we still had all of our facilities working, so that it wasn't like a hurricane, for example, where we may lose power," Ortlieb explains. "So we could still use our regular menus, but in a different way."



Donations from a variety of outside sources are delivered to off-hours staff in various hospital units by dining staff and redeployed employees from other departments.

That "different way" in part involved having to create a new emergency menu that utilized more cold than hot items to ease pressures on the nurses who took over delivery of meals to patient beds. The department also suspended its use of the Catering To You bedside select menu meal order program and went to a non-select menu. That suspension was finally lifted in early June when the staff started going back to taking bedside orders from non-COVID patients.

"I also have to say that our production team did a fabulous job of responding to the food [deliveries] that came through the door that wasn't always what we ordered," Ortlieb notes. "Sometimes we'd order one thing and they'd substitute or short us, but our production team did a wonderful job of reacting to it and planning and adjusting menus so we can still put out delicious meals with what we had in-house. In fact, it allowed them to be a little more creative."

One thing that helped was being able to access the Compass One Healthcare Webtrition database of recipes, "so they could go in and say we have these key ingredients—give me a recipe to go with it," Ortlieb says.

For the 68-bed temporary tent hospital, the team developed a non-select menu consisting of a continental breakfast, a cold sandwich lunch and a warm dinner packed in disposable bags that was wheeled across 5th Avenue three times a day on mobile carts—a total of over 150 meals a day at its peak.

"Luckily they had a drop-off location that was easy to access," Ortlieb comments. "We did have security on

standby in case the weather was miserable, but mostly it was our team doing it by themselves. It was amazing—we would bring over food, water, supplements, anything to meet all of those patients' needs."

Delivering on donations

The cafeteria discontinued all self-service when the crisis hit and instead offered a combination of hot foods to go and grab and go. The grill remained open with a limited selection along with the pizza station and the hot entrée station, which served a rotation of dishes. There is also a mini mart for staff to get basic groceries and non-foods like paper products.

However, a fair amount of staff feeding, especially for off-hour staff, came from outside meal donations, which the Mt. Sinai dining staff along with redeployed employees from closed areas of the hospital have been around the premises.

"Normally, our retail spaces are open until 7:30 p.m. and the second shift would use restaurants in our area to get their meals," Ortlieb explains, "but since most of those restaurants have been closed after 8 p.m., our retail team became our delivery team for donated foods. They take the donated foods, package them up and deliver them to different areas [around the hospital]. We've been to places we never knew existed!"

Ortlieb says the dining staff gets "a lot of thank you's and positive feedback because those teams really were overlooked initially, and this [donation delivery service] has worked very well."

Of course, not all donations go to second and third shifts, and the deliveries do depend on how much food has come in, but Ortlieb says she's grateful for the generosity of donors like Goldman Sachs, which partnered with Just Salads to deliver 3,000 meals every Wednesday, more than enough to feed both the evening and day shifts, "so when I have that we share it with everyone," she notes. "But then sometimes we'll just get smaller donations, like Epicure will send us 50 meals once a week at lunchtime, and so we send them to a unit or two that are open. It's been quite a journey and I've learned a lot about organizing and making sure everybody gets fed with a little treat during the week."

Challenging times? Certainly, but "as difficult as it was being faced with a new challenge every day, it was also exciting because it really made you use your organizational and leadership skills," Ortlieb declares.

