Optimizing Courts: Overview & Implementation Summary of the Protein for All™ Program

Introduction: Courts are increasingly at the forefront of addressing our nation's mental health crisis. Research indicates that food insecurity and lack of food access worsen addictions, mental illness, and poor decision-making. When individuals come to court without having eaten, emotionally reactive and uncivil behavior is more likely to occur. This, in turn, contributes to burnout, secondary trauma, and addictions among court officials who manage these emotionally charged situations throughout the day.

Mental health is inherently complex. Going extended periods without eating shifts our cognitive processes from the responsive cortex to the reactive limbic brain. This is particularly evident in individuals with primary and secondary trauma, mental illness, addictions, or burnout. Protein for All is a program that compassionately addresses the essential need for nourishment, enabling people to make decisions using their responsive cortex and to be more fully engaged in the process.

History: The Protein for All Program emerged from Dr. Kristen Allott's 2014 training for Washington State Superior Court and Tribal judicial officers, emphasizing the pivotal role of nutrition in sound decision-making. Collaborating with the Court Improvement Training Academy (CITA) at the University of Washington School of Law, subsequent sessions led by Dr. Allott sparked widespread enthusiasm, inspiring judicial officers, court staff, and Parent Allies to initiate Protein for All programs in their communities. A decade later, the Administrative Offices of the Courts enlisted Dr. Allott and Natasha Duarte to enhance and expand the program's tools.

Intention: Protein for All aims to optimize court experiences in two key ways:

1) Providing protein-rich food to stabilize blood glucose for 2-3 hours. This allows people to access the responsive part of their brains that helps them engage in the court process. Eating mitigates the defensive and emotional reactions associated with the absence of food, enabling individuals to absorb information effectively.

2) Offering food is an act of compassion that helps break the cycle of trauma. It signals the intent to provide support and plants a seed of trust. This is a physical representation of this court being trauma-responsive.

The essence of Protein for All is to help everyone – parents, children, and professionals - neurologically and emotionally engage in the court system. Protein for All programs have four components: education, champions, high-protein snacks, and simple, sustainable, data-driven systems.

Protein for All's place in the court system: There are many reasons to have a Protein for All program. When parents eat before shelter care hearings, their brains have the fuel needed to be more engaged and less reactive. It's easier for them to take in important information and engage further in the complicated process of dependency court. When parents are able to be more solution-oriented, court administrators and lawyers often report that it's less stressful to engage with them because they are less emotionally reactive. This translates into less secondary trauma and less burnout for everyone in the system. This positive effect is tangible enough that many lawyers and administrators have actually supplied protein bars and shakes to keep these programs going.

Benefits of a Protein for All program: Protein for All programs promote better emotional regulation, benefiting court officials and parents. Examples of high-stake events prone to emotional dysregulation include shelter care hearings, meetings with lawyers, visitations, assessments, and follow-up hearings.

How to start a Protein for All program: When planning to implement a Protein for All program, a key question is whether the program will be implemented virtually, in person, or both. Here are some ideas for implementing a program based on location.

Questions to ask	Virtual	In-person
Who will manage the Protein for All program?	Parent allies, court staff, volunteers	Parent allies, court staff, volunteers
Where will the food be provided?	If needed, strategize around food access prior to the parent needing to interact with the court	In lobbies or waiting areas, in lawyers' offices, during visitations, etc.
How will the food be accessed?	Preplan having food available prior to the interaction with the court. If needed, strategize around food access; vouchers to nearby food vendors; explore connections with food shelves, community meals, etc.	Cart, basket, shelf, closet; tokens for a vending machine or vouchers for nearby food vendors
When will the food be accessible?	Confirm if providing reminders 15-20 minutes before a hearing would be helpful; if yes, confirm how to do so	Individually handed out or on a "help yourself" basis; anytime the location is open or only during specific time frames
What kind of food will be accessed?	Whatever they have on hand, ideally a protein-rich food or shake. However, anything - even white sugar or candy - is better than nothing.	Ideally, a variety of protein-rich food, shakes, and sandwiches; any food is better than no food. Vouchers to nearby vendors, tokens for vending machines
Who is eligible to receive food? *This has implications for how much food you need to secure for in-person programs*	Not applicable	Anyone in the court system; parents only; parents and kids; just kids; anyone who's grumpy
How many people will access food through the program/How much food do you need to secure?	Not applicable	The answer to this question will reflect your answer to the question about who is eligible. Likewise, you may need to adjust who is eligible based on how much food you can secure.