

Protein for All™ Startup Tool Kit

For mere peanuts a day, you can improve your court



PROTEIN FOR ALL™

Many Thanks to the Early and Ongoing Supporters of Protein for All

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And all the people who heard about Protein for All and moved it forward because it's an achievable and compassionate act.

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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 be more fully engaged in the process.

First virtual interaction

Imagine a young parent, Kai, who is having the worst day of her life - her two children were taken from her home and placed in emergency foster care, and now she has to meet someone from the court via Zoom. On Zoom, Kai meets Annie, a court official, who is there to explain what will happen as she enters the dependency court system.

Annie: "Hi, Kai, I'm Annie. I'm meeting with you to help you understand the court process. But before we get into that, when did you last eat?"

Kai: "Last night."

Annie: "Do you have some food you can eat while we're talking? I don't mind waiting."

Kai: "I'm so upset; I don't think I could eat anything right now."

Annie: "Having something to eat will help you problem solve and remember all the information I need to give you today. Do you have a protein bar? Even crackers and cheese or a piece of candy will help you feel better. While you're getting that, I'll email you a handout that explains why food helps your brain think more clearly."

Kai: "Ok, I'll see what I can find."

First in-person interaction

Imagine a young parent, River, who is having the worst day of her life - her two children were taken from her home and placed in emergency foster care, and now she has come to court. In the courthouse lobby, River meets Lex, a court official, who sits down to explain what will happen on this first day of the dependency court.

Lex: "Hi River, I'm Lex. I'm here to help you understand what's happening today. But before we get into that, when was the last time you ate?"

River: "Last night."

Lex: "Did you bring food for today?"

River: "No, I was just so upset, I didn't think about it."

Lex: "Can I give you a protein bar? It will help your brain be at its best today. And this handout explains why protein helps your brain think more clearly so you can problem-solve."

River: "Yes, thank you," as she accepts both.

Food and compassion decrease reactive behavior

1) When the parent eats food or a protein bar, their blood sugar stays stable for a few hours. Stable blood sugar helps them think clearly and stay focused while they're having high-stakes conversations. Without food, they might feel more defensive and emotional, which can make it hard for them to understand anything.

2) When food is offered or encouraged, it shows compassion and care. The parent starts to feel like they can trust the person helping them a little more. This interaction shows that the court is being trauma-responsive.

Let's continue the in-person interaction

An hour later, River meets with Corey, her attorney. Corey has a busy day but knows he benefits from brain-smart self-care. Most nights, Corey gets 8 hours of sleep and manages to get in 30 minutes of yoga or walking before work. He carries packets of trail mix (nuts and raisins) in his bag, which he offers to clients, and he will eat himself if he misses a meal or has a hard case. Corey has seen first-hand how clients can better participate in their cases and want to get to solutions after eating the trail mix or protein bar rather than telling him how unfair this is. For Corey, this means he has energy left for himself and his children at the end of the day. He is also less likely to spend time rethinking his interaction with River because they both did their best in the moment – a good step for preventing secondary trauma.

Shortly after meeting River, Corey asks if she's had something to eat.

River replies, "Yes, someone gave me a protein bar earlier." Corey says, "Good, here's a packet of trail mix to tuck into your pocket. We should be going into the courtroom soon, but if we have to wait a while, you can eat it. Having something to eat shortly before your hearing will help you really hear what the judge says to you. Let's talk about your case..."

This is the essence of the Protein for All program, helping everyone – parents, children, and professionals - neurologically and emotionally engage in the court system.

While giving snacks rich in protein to parents and staff might seem easy, starting the program involves answering some important questions, which can vary depending on the court. The solutions come from people who believe that having enough protein-rich

food is essential for doing our best. This toolkit gives you questions to think about, stories of successful solutions, and tools to help with learning and engagement.

History of the Protein for All Program

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 projects 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.

Protein for All Program Components

We have identified four key components to establishing a successful Protein for All program: education, champions, high-protein snacks, and simple, sustainable, data-driven systems.

Education

Protein for All teaches people in the court system about simple ways to spend more time in the responsive part of their brain instead of the more highly charged, emotionally reactive part. When they do this, they have more energy and can make better choices. It also prevents burnout and secondary trauma and helps people stay healthier in the long run.

Protein for All Champions

One reason Protein for All works well in courts is that it helps deal with the stress everyone feels there. When someone who has been through a lot finds out that eating protein can make them feel calmer, they want to tell others about it. These people were some of the first Protein for All supporters. Their enthusiasm started a movement that's now part of a state-wide program run by the Parent Ally Program, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), and other state programs.

Who are examples of Protein for All Champions?

- Anyone can be a Protein for All Champion: judicial officers, attorneys, Parent Allies, and court coordinators are all driving forces behind Protein for All programs
- Usually, a Protein for All Champion has personally experienced how paying attention to what they eat helps them feel good and makes a positive difference for the people around them.

"I wish I'd known earlier that self-care is part of the job so that I can maintain optimal decision-making ability."

Commissioner in WA

Protein-Rich Snacks with Carbohydrates

Protein-rich foods should contain at least 10 grams of protein and between 10 and 40 grams of carbohydrates per serving, and the list of protein-rich foods is continually expanding.

- Examples of protein-rich foods include nuts, jerky, protein bars, protein shakes, (some) sandwiches, and other low-cost foods.
- Protein-rich foods can be purchased at reasonable prices from grocery stores and other stores, such as Costco and Grocery Outlet.

Low Cost, Actionable, Data-Driven Systems

Protein for All works well because it lets each court or office set up the program in a way that suits them best. Here are some ways counties are using the Protein for All program:

- Spokane County offers parents protein-rich food at the Shelter Care hearings and at classes taught by Parent Allies - Parent Hope and Rising Strong classes. Attorneys for parents and the Office of the Attorney General donate food to the program. The annual costs of the program are estimated to be around \$1,000 for:
 - Shelter Care hearings
 - Building Hope classes
 - Rising Strong classes
- A mobile cart designated and supplied with protein bars is a quick and easy way to make protein-rich snacks available. One or two people take responsibility for keeping the cart stocked, bringing it out, and storing it at the appropriate times. Anyone at the court can help themselves to a protein bar to support a healthy power supply to the brain and body. Generally, however, the protein bars are offered to parents and children waiting for a hearing, talking to their attorney, or attending a Parent Ally class.
- Attorneys, social workers, providers, and Parent Allies can also have protein available to offer clients before they attend meetings, evaluations, or visits with their children.

"When parents come to my office I have my receptionist give them a protein bar and when I am at court we both eat a protein bar. I can have a much more focused conversation."

Parent Attorney in Eastern Washington

How to Start a Protein for All Program

There is a worksheet called Planning and Implementing a Protein for All Program that you can fill out as you work through this part of the toolkit. We have also provided a video explaining How to Use the Protein for All Toolkit.

Step 1. Clarify how your court will benefit from a Protein for All program

There are many reasons to have a Protein for All program. For example, 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 dependency court process. When parents can 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 effect is tangible enough that many lawyers and administrators have supplied protein bars and shakes out of their own pockets to keep these programs going.

Protein for All programs positively impact the court system in many other ways. Are there specific goals you hope to achieve when setting up a program in your court?

Step 2. Cultivate allies and decision-makers

To start a Protein for All program, find someone in your court who has the power to make things happen, like a judge or court administrator. They should be willing to help remove obstacles, involve the community, and organize meetings with court partners. Each court might have different people who can do this job.

Many people in Washington State courts have learned about Protein for All from workshops led by Dr. Allott or from people supporting existing Protein for All programs. These are good people to talk to first. Do you know who these people are in your court? If not, who can you ask to find out? If there have been a lot of changes in your court recently, you might need to start from scratch. Preparing what you'll say before you talk to them is helpful. You want to be able to explain why Protein for All is a good idea and how it can help. The goal is to convince them to support the program.

There are three tools to help with this:

- A worksheet on how to prepare for and have persuasive conversations
- Draft text that you can customize to solicit support
- A 2-page summary of Protein for All

Step 3. How do you envision implementing a Protein for All program at your court?

Where would better emotional regulation benefit court officials and parents?

Protein for All programs promote better emotional regulation, benefiting court officials, parents, and everyone involved. Examples of high-stake events prone to emotional dysregulation include shelter care hearings, meetings with lawyers, visitations, assessments, and follow-up hearings. Are there other possible points of intervention that you want to consider?

At this stage of planning, it's okay to think expansively. Adding some ranking to your ideas will be helpful when decisions need to be made about implementation details.

How will your program be implemented – virtually, in-person, or both?

When setting up a Protein for All program, you need to think about different things if your court convenes online, in person, or both. The basic concepts that need to be shared are the same, but how you share them will look different.

Parents need help understanding why eating right before their court hearings is important and how this helps them make better decisions. These ideas can be integrated into other preparations with parents before hearings. Here are some ways to do this use:

- Give parents a tipsheet explaining why eating is important, what to eat, and when to eat. This can be handed to them in person, emailed, or texted. It can also be stapled to other paperwork that parents receive to ensure they get this important information.
- Give parents links to videos in the online Protein for All toolkit. These videos explain how our brains and bodies work, why “lizard brain” snacks and meals can help them be less emotionally reactive, and give ideas for cheap meals with lots of protein. You can share these links with QR codes, emails, or texts.
- Tools are provided to support education about Protein for All include:
 - A Brain Smart Guide for Coming to Court
 - A tipsheet on how to Be at Your Best for High-Stakes Events
 - A short video on Preparing for High-Stakes Events: Tips for Being at Your Best When it Counts the Most (4 minutes)
 - A short video on Improving Energy, Mental Clarity, and Decision-Making: Eating Protein at Every Meal (7 minutes)
 - A video on The Science Behind Protein for All (24 minutes)

Knowing what to do is one thing, but doing it is another. You can help parents better if you understand their context. It's important to ask about their situation to avoid making wrong assumptions. Are they having trouble getting food or experiencing food access challenges? Do they have a kitchen? Are they unsheltered? Can they get to places they need to go? Do they understand English? Do they have access to the internet? Suppose they are experiencing any of these challenges. In that case, they may need help figuring out these issues before they can fully engage.

In-person programs have a lot of moving pieces to consider when planning for successful implementation.

- Who will manage the Protein for All program? Think about who will manage these resources and how they will be distributed. Will it be a single person or a team? It's important to have someone in charge of procurement, and depending on how you answered some of the questions above, other roles might include handing out food and information about Protein for All, vouchers or vending machine tokens; rolling a cart in and out of a public space; unlocking a closet and propping the door open; etc. One person can do all of this, or multiple people can get involved. Possible answers might include parent allies, court staff, or volunteers. When working out the details for implementation, be sure to name names or positions. If this task is assigned to a particular position, draft something that can be included in that overall job description. Remember to make plans for when someone is taking time off; shared responsibilities are essential for success.
- Where will the food be provided? In a lobby or waiting area? The lawyer's office? During visitations? During therapy? Remember from Section 3 that food is ideally provided before high-stakes interactions with the court as a tool for improved emotional regulation.
- What kind of food will you offer? While protein-rich snacks, bars, shakes, and sandwiches are ideal (because protein+carbs help the brain focus for a longer time), it's really important to remember that **any** food is better than no food.
- How will the food be provided? You can consider having it on a cart, in a basket, on a shelf, in a closet, or even from a vending machine if you can dictate what's put in the machine! There's not a single "right" answer; whatever you choose needs to work in the physical layout of your court. If there's no way to provide food in the court building, are there nearby food vendors you could provide vouchers for?
 - If working with food vendors, using vouchers or gift cards is common.
 - If you provide food and drink through a vending machine, can you provide tokens for the machine? Or a pre-paid card? Depending on what items are in the vending machine, consider adding some kind of signage that draws attention to the protein-rich options, plus some short reminders about why protein-rich food helps. (Tip: You can use QR codes to link to further information.)

- When will the food be accessible? Is the plan to hand out food to individuals, or will it be provided on a "help yourself" basis? Will food be available whenever the location is open or only during specific times or days? The decisions you make about these questions will impact the number of people who need to be involved and the amount of structure required. Remember - there's no right or wrong, just what works for your context.
- Another "Who" question to answer is who you plan on feeding through your program. This could include anyone in the court system (judges, lawyers, administrators, volunteers, parents and kids, just kids, just grumpy people...) or a subset of these folks. The answer to this question might be connected to **how much** food you're able to provide. Some courts make this available to everyone but encourage those who can to donate food back to the program in exchange for taking a snack when they are in need.
- Based on what you sketch out to address the above questions, how many people will your Protein for All program ideally serve? How will you source the food, vouchers, or tokens? Answers to these questions will inform your budget, and likewise, how your program is funded may well inform your answer to these questions.

The following table provides some ideas for addressing the nuts and bolts of implementing your program in both virtual and in-person settings to help you get a handle on these questions.

Ideas for implementing a Protein for All 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? <i>This has implications for how much food you need to secure for in-person programs</i>	Not applicable	Anyone in the court system; parents only; parents and kids; just kids; anyone 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.

Step 4. Funding your Protein for All program

When planning and gathering support for your Protein for All program, a key question you need to consider is how the program will be funded. This section will help you develop a budget and fund-raising plan. For virtual programs, the expenses might be limited to photocopying handouts to give to parents and training for case workers, staff, or volunteers about the program. For in-person programs, where you're actually providing food, the list of budget items increases.

For in-person programs, implementation choices impact your funding needs

- How many people will you be giving food to or interacting with?
- How much will it cost to provide the food through purchases? What, if any, could be covered through donation requests?
- Can the needed funds be accessed through funding available through the court system, covered in full or offset through cash or food donations, or supported by partnering with a food shelf or non-profit? If you do partner with a non-profit, do they have someone who can work with you to write a grant to fund your program?
- If everyone is invited to take food as part of the program, you can encourage a "take a bar, return a box" practice for those who can afford it. This acknowledges that at any given moment, someone might be struggling and need a protein-rich snack; and can also translate into a way to bring in a significant supply of food.

Potential sources of funding include: non-profits, retail outlets like Costco and other grocery stores, small grants through foundations (for example, [Clif Family Foundation](#)), and detailed research into municipal budgets have resulted in small pockets of money for feeding people experiencing food insecurity that have been leveraged to support Protein for All programs.

Keep in mind that Protein for All programs usually have relatively small budgets, but it does vary based on the number of people you hope to serve. Get creative and think broadly about how you can fund your program, either through financial donations or food donations. A draft donation request letter is included in this toolkit.

Step 5. Collecting Data

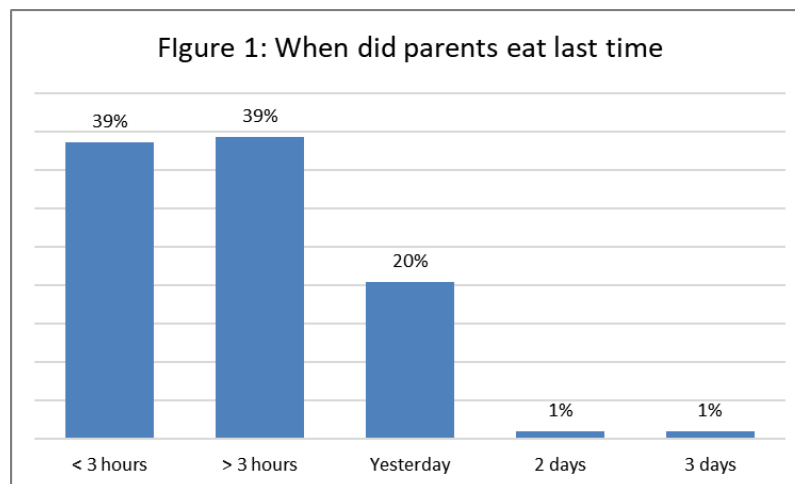
The long-term continuation of a program is often determined by knowing it is making a difference. A few years back, a preliminary study was done in Spokane, WA. The target audience for the study was parents attending the initial court hearings during a morning court docket. Several volunteers, mostly parents' alumni, approached the participants shortly after their arrival at the courthouse with a set of questions. Approximately 378 parents were approached, but not everybody answered the survey questions, nor did everyone accept the protein.

The results suggest that a significant number of parents may be experiencing food insecurity. Here's a breakdown of the findings and their implications for the Protein for All program:

1. Survey insights on food insecurity

- a. Twenty percent (N=66) of respondents reported not having eaten since the previous day, and an additional 2% (N=6) said they hadn't eaten in more than a day (see Figure 1). This indicates that a significant number of program participants struggle to access adequate food.
- b. Thirty-nine percent (N=125) of parents ate within the last three hours. However, this does not necessarily mean they have enough or nutritionally adequate food, only that they ate recently.
- c. Another 39% (N=127) reported having eaten more than three hours ago.

These findings demonstrate a clear need for the Protein for All program to support those with inconsistent and/or insufficient food access. By addressing both immediate and longer-term food security needs, the program can significantly improve the well-being of the parents coming to courts.



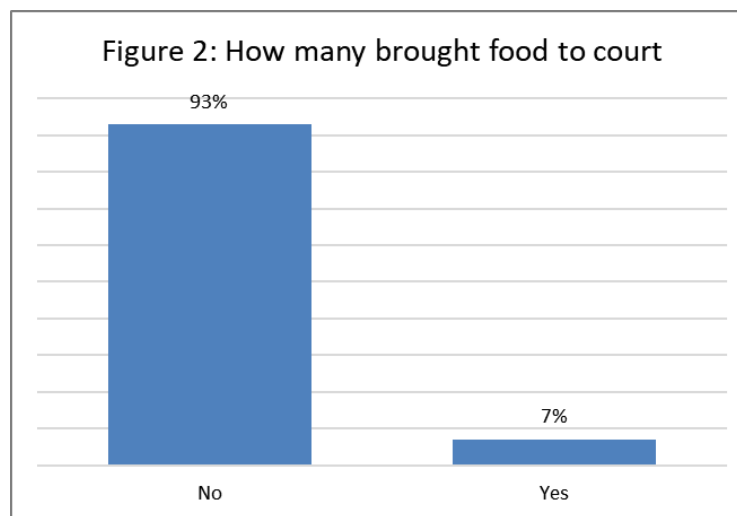
Recommendation: To gain a clearer understanding of participants' last meal times, we recommend adding a follow-up question about reasons for not eating for more than three hours. There could be various reasons for prolonged periods without eating, including fasting, cultural food preferences and dietary restrictions, busy schedules, medical conditions, or personal preferences. Understanding this context would provide more insight into the data collected.

2. The majority did not bring food with them to the courthouse

- The study showed that 93% (300 out of 323) of the people who replied to the survey did not bring food with them, and only 7% (23 out of 323) did (see Figure 2). The data also suggest that people who ate more recently were somewhat more likely to bring food with them:

- *Recently Eaten (<3 hours ago)*: Among those who ate within the last three hours, about 1 out of every 10 people (or 10%) brought food with them to court.
- *Ate Earlier (>3 hours ago or yesterday)*: For those who ate more than three hours ago or yesterday, an even smaller percentage, roughly 1 in 16 people (or around 6%), brought their own food.
- *Not Eaten in the last 2 or 3 days*: None of the individuals who hadn't eaten earlier than yesterday (which was 6 people) brought any food.

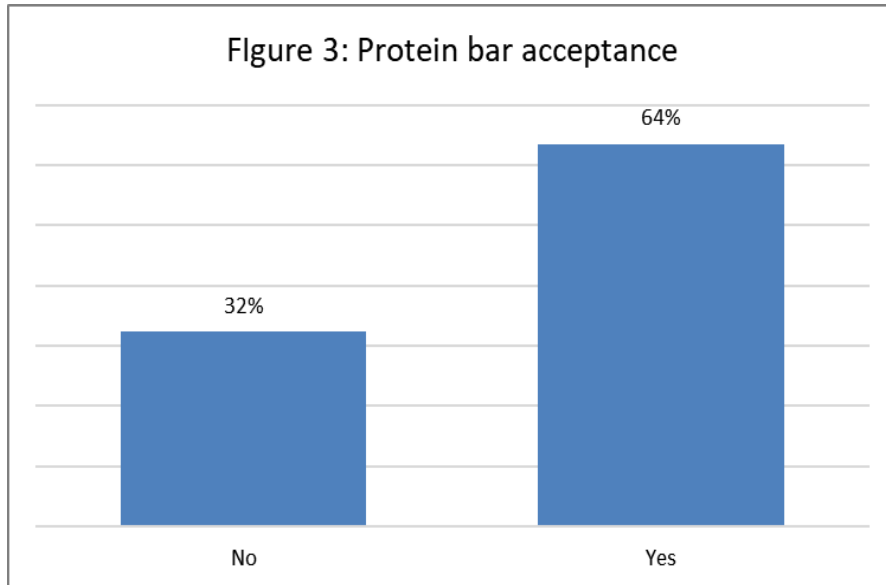
A main takeaway from these results is that a majority (93%) of people who came to the courthouse did not bring their own food.



3. Who grabbed a protein bar?

1. The results of the survey show that a majority of people (64%, N=239) who responded to the survey reported taking a protein bar, while 32% (N= 122) did not take it (see Figure 3). Additionally, 18 people chose not to answer the question about whether or not they took a protein bar.
2. *The highest percentage* of protein bar acceptance (88%) occurred among those who have eaten more than 3 hours ago. This suggests that people are more likely to reach for a protein bar when they haven't eaten recently.
3. The chances of taking a protein bar were similar (around 67%) for those who ate less than 3 hours ago, yesterday, or more than a day before the hearings.
4. Interestingly, bringing their own food didn't affect people's decision to take a protein bar. Specifically, there was no significant difference in protein bar acceptance between those who brought their own food (18 out of 23, or 78% acceptance) and those who didn't (72%).

A main takeaway is that these results suggest that offering protein bars at the courthouse is a well-received initiative. A majority of people who responded to the survey accepted a protein bar.



Recommendation: The current data doesn't tell us the whole story about why some people didn't take protein bars. To understand their motivations, a question could be added to the survey directly asking them why they declined a protein bar. Some people might have dietary restrictions that prevent them from consuming protein bars due to allergies, sensitivities, or following specific diets. It's possible some people simply don't like protein bars or prefer other snacks. Individual preferences and dietary habits vary, so flexibility and customization are key. Overall, gathering more data on why people decline protein bars will allow programs to be more flexible and adapt your offerings to better suit your community's needs.

4. Protein consumption prior to court attendance

The survey examined participants' last meal choices, specifically focusing on protein intake. Researchers categorized responses based on their best guess whether protein was a part of the meal or marked it as "maybe" when uncertain.

Here are the key findings:

1. *Ate Earlier (>3 hours ago):* Over half (53%) of respondents who hadn't eaten in over 3 hours included protein in their last meal, marking the highest percentage.
2. Surprisingly, there was no significant difference in protein intake between individuals who had eaten less than 3 hours ago (39%) and those who ate yesterday (39%). This suggests that the timing of the last meal does not consistently correlate with protein consumption, indicating other factors influence protein choices.
3. *Not Eaten in the last 3 days:* Notably, 2 out of the 3 respondents who had their last meal three days ago included protein as part of their meal.

5. Last meal timing and emotional state prior to court hearing

The study showed that 47% (150 out of 354) of respondents presented as anxious, detached, or irritable shortly after arriving at the courthouse. [*Note: Engagement levels were measured shortly after the arrival at the courthouse by volunteer researchers, ensuring immediate and relevant data collection*].

1. *Longer Periods Without Eating*: 83% (or 5 out of 6) individuals who hadn't eaten for 2 or 3 days presented as anxious, detached, or irritable shortly prior to the court hearing.
2. *Eating Yesterday*: Participants who had eaten their last meal yesterday displayed mixed behaviors, with 49% being engaged before the court hearing and 51% being anxious, detached, or irritable shortly after arriving.
3. *Recent Meals (Less than 3 Hours Ago)*: Among those who had eaten less than 3 hours ago, 59% were engaged prior to the hearing. Conversely, among those who had eaten more than 3 hours ago, only 44% were engaged, suggesting that shorter durations since the last meal may be linked to higher engagement levels.

Recommendation: To assess the impact of providing protein bars on engagement levels, it is recommended that engagement is observed and measured within the courtroom setting. This will help determine if the immediate nutritional support translates to sustained engagement during court proceedings.

Even the most basic data collection highlights the human component of entering the complexity of the court system. The Administration Office of the Courts is committed to supporting the establishment of Protein for All programs throughout the State of Washington. More information about how to collect data for Protein for All programs can be found at WAcita.org/protein-for-all

Conclusion

Protein For All started as a grassroots movement and is fundamentally about making a specific moment a little bit better by extending compassion during the hardest moments in life. This benefits not only the recipients, the people entering the court system, but also the community supporting and recognizing the complexity of the court system impacted by mental health, food and housing insecurity, and decreasing funding, all of which create conditions for burnout. Despite all of this, we can make a moment better by offering food that improves in-the-moment decision-making and recognizes our shared humanity. Good luck, and thank you for your good work in the world!