



# ARMINDA KOVALCHIK, RDN, LDN

Nutritionist IV  
Somatic Health and  
Nutritional Services  
Department of Juvenile  
Services in Maryland

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Arminda Kovalchik, RDN, LDN is the Nutritionist for the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. Arminda started her position in February, only two weeks prior to the COVID-19 closures. Though her first couple months have been unique, she has still been able to enjoy the variety of hats a Registered Dietitian wears in the juvenile justice system. Arminda, or Mindy for short, has the combined responsibilities of a clinical dietitian, nutrition educator, and menu planner. “It’s really cool because you very rarely encounter a position where you get to do both clinical and school nutrition”

Mindy graduated from the University of Maryland and completed her internship through Sodexo's Internship Program. “I worked in nutrition research for 7 years as a contractor with the Food Surveys Research Group- USDA, starting as an intern my senior year and working my way up to a specialist position. We handled the dietary survey component of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys as well as developing the nutrient profiles for foods in national nutrition databases.”

The Maryland Juvenile System consists of approximately 10 facilities, serving kids who generally range in age from 13-19. The programs participate in the School Breakfast Program, National School Lunch Program, and the Child and Adult Food Care Program for dinner.

When asked about the challenges of menu planning, Mindy explained that “Child Nutrition Programs in schools are developed for kids who are going home at the end of the day. Our kids aren’t going home. There are school children whose only source of food comes from school, but all of the children and teens in the juvenile system are completely reliant upon our program. Calorie restrictions can be challenging, especially when some kids are asking for more food and may feel hungrier than others. In addition to this challenge, we also have the added challenge of safety.”

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Twice a year Mindy and her team conduct a satisfaction survey. Just like every other kid, her customers love pizza and chicken tenders “because at the core, they are still kids. Everyone has so many different ideas around food and what they like. We really do want our meals to be something they look forward to and something that brings them comfort.”

Her love for feeding the kids is part of the reason why menu planning is the most rewarding part of Mindy’s job. “I like figuring out what can I do to make this something that the kids will really like or thinking about how can we implement more nutrition education or have a themed meal.”

Mindy also emphasized the importance of having a great team to achieve these goals. “We have an amazing team of managers who really put the kids first. I very much believe in collaboration and value input from those “on the front lines” so to speak. They know their facilities, staff, and youth in a way that I don’t. They have also been doing this a lot longer than me, so they understand the ins and outs of foodservice not only within our agency, but as an industry. From the director to the cooks, we are a team and each have a valuable role. That is one of the things I love about juvenile justice as a whole, each department is integral and everyone works together to help these youth. I never want to set anyone up for failure, so I am often on the phone with foodservice managers asking: what will work for their facility? Can they obtain this product? What do they think of this idea?”

One of Mindy’s goals is to really focus on nutrition education in the juvenile system. “Education is incredibly valuable, especially because the kids want to learn. Food service is so forgiving. You see so many big name chefs with tattoos or coming from rough backgrounds. I think food service is a great opportunity and nutrition education can be used towards career development. The kitchen doesn’t care what you look like or what you’ve done- they just want to know that you can cook and put out delicious food.”

In closing with Mindy, she ardently shared that “this is not a position most people may gravitate towards, but I would tell other dietitians not to be scared of it. It is such a rewarding job to help people who are underserved and overlooked. This is a career that really allows you to have your hands in all different sorts of pots from menu development to clinical nutrition. I encourage students to explore the area on their rotations.”

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