

Danielle DiCristofano

Registered Dietitian

Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center



Danielle DiCristofano is the Registered Dietitian for Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center in Chicago, Illinois. The Juvenile Detention Center provides temporary secure housing for youth who are awaiting their court date. It also houses youth who have been transferred from Juvenile Court to Criminal Court and would otherwise be incarcerated in the county jail. The center's goal is to provide the kids with a "safe, secure, and caring environment with programs and structure that enhance personal development and improve opportunity for success upon return to the community."

The facility has the capacity to house 300 youth from the age of 12 through 18. Danielle's position is affiliated with Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The juvenile center has a high school program on campus so that the kids can continue their education.

Danielle has always had an interest in mental health. After graduating from the University of Dayton in Ohio, she attended Napa State Hospital's internship because it was one of the few prison internships in the country. The prison where she worked is for those declared insane at the time of the crime and are awaiting a diagnosis to get medication before entering the state or county prison. The facility also had a drug rehab center and unit for total parenteral nutrition (tpn). Danielle felt like she had a wide variety of experience from the prison because she was able to experience food service, patient education, and clinical nutrition. Danielle's internship also included a school nutrition rotation. "I learned a lot about large scale food service operations, mostly in the prison system. I did one rotation at St. Helena School District and I thought it was really fun to teach the kids. I love getting them excited about nutrition. I loved teaching and food service, so when the job at Cook County became available, I was excited to be able to do all of the parts of my internship that I loved."

The nutrition program at Cook County Juvenile Detention Center operates under the National School Lunch Program. All kids qualify for free meals. Danielle is responsible for staff training on food safety, sanitation, and portion sizes. She also is heavily involved in nutrition education with the youth. She is always trying to think of new ways to improve the nutrition program and get the kids involved.

One project Danielle is currently focused on is hydration, so that the residents don't have to share a water fountain during COVID. Simple task? Not so much in this setting. Danielle faces a world of safety challenges due to the unique atmosphere of working in the prison system. In this situation, the kids can't have water bottles. Danielle has to find other means of getting the kids to drink water, such as getting cartons rather than bottles.

When asked what her biggest challenge is at work, Danielle shared that "You can't serve the students anything that could potentially be a weapon or a threat. Example, they can only eat with sporks. When making a menu, I have to go through each item and ask, can this be consumed with a spork or hands. Now with COVID, I am even trying to cut back on the hand-held food options. The other challenge is that oftentimes in the government sector, it takes twice as long to get changes or projects approved. You have to go through so many levels and also be aware that changes you make can impact the safety of so many kids."

Danielle shared her vision for a larger scale project that she has on her mind. She plans to eventually create a culinary school within the center. Through the program, she can teach Serve Safe classes, so that the kids have a certificate when they go into the world and when they are ready to look for jobs. The weight of impact that this program would have on the teens could be life changing.

As if that is not rewarding enough, Danielle shared how happy it makes her just to walk through the halls of the center.

" I love walking through the hallways and seeing the kids run up to their windows, excited to share with me their feedback on menu items or ask nutrition questions. When you're locked up, food is sometimes what you look forward to all day. The kids get excited about food and that makes me happy that I can make their lives a little better."