

ON THE FRONT LINES

A look at one ACF chef's work in healthcare during a global pandemic

By Amelia Levin

During the coronavirus pandemic, Chef John Selick has worked hard to prep his culinary team at University Hospitals in Cleveland.

"I hate to admit it, but walking into work these days is like walking into a burning building without a hose."

Chef John Selick CEC, CCA, WCEC, AAC, is not a nurse or doctor, but reporting to the kitchens of one of Ohio's largest healthcare systems in the middle of a global pandemic is enough to make anyone nervous. As senior culinary manager for Sodexo, Selick—who is also president of the ACF Cleveland Chapter—oversees the foodservice program and 13 executive chefs for University Hospitals' 12-unit campus in that city.

Chef Selick's team is on the front lines, feeding patients and healthcare workers battling the novel coronavirus at this 1,000-plus bed medical center. No one on his team has walked away. Everyone is showing up, albeit they are socially distancing.

"I am so impressed with the staff here," Chef Selick says. "I was expecting to deal with a reduced workforce because people are scared—or worse, sick. In our daily huddles, for the past 15 years, I have always tried to reiterate that our jobs are so important to the patients, their visitors and to the nurses, doctors and other hospital staff we feed. Many have nowhere to go and we need to take care of them and give them a quality, nutritious meal." In a pandemic, when healthcare workers serving the public are like soldiers in a battle, these cooks' jobs have become more important than ever.

Chef Selick admits he's scared—scared, not only of contracting the virus, but of bringing it home to his wife, two daughters and high-risk mother-in-law, who is currently caring for his two-year-old while he and his wife both work jobs deemed essential (Selick's wife is also a healthcare chef). He's scared, like many of us, of so many unknowns.

When we talked to Chef Selick at press time, the state was on full lockdown. The hospital only had a couple COVID-19 patients in isolation at the time, but it was gearing up for a potentially much larger outbreak, designating certain floors as COVID-19-only and making plans to set up triage tents outside if need be.

In the kitchen, Chef Selick channeled his initial panic to prepare and gear up as well. Planning for the worst-case scenario, he reviewed disaster plans and menus with his superiors and began stocking up on frozen and pantry items, disposables, cleaning chemicals and sanitizers, masks and gloves. He also planned for different hospital scenarios, including preparing and delivering food for healthcare workers outside makeshift triage tents, if it came to that. He also reviewed and amended the company's safety and sanitation procedures.

"We have protocol in place for handling infectious diseases, but we have to treat this a little differently and limit exposure as much as possible," Chef Selick says. Kitchen staff stopped taking orders and dropping food in rooms; orders are now taken over the

phone, and deliveries go to the nurse's stations. In the kitchen, there are frequent handwashing reminders, use of gloves and masks and hand sanitizer everywhere. If the situation were to escalate, there would be no more dishwashing; trays and permanentware would be swapped out for disposables in order to prevent cross-contamination.

"Ironically, my cooks are probably in the safest place possible right now," Selick says. At press time, Chef Selick's storeroom contained a month's worth of to-go packaging and thousands of disposable trays that he hoped he wouldn't have to use.

Since visitors were no longer allowed at the hospital and dining spaces remained closed, Chef Selick's team had more space and time to develop meals to-go for hospital staff, who were becoming too tired to deal with cooking when they got home. Selick's team started with packaged, ready-to-heat hot meals in servings of two and four, but then realized that staff was more in need of groceries and frozen food in order to stock up at home to feed themselves and their families if their hours were extended. So, he developed a mini-market for the staff.

"We started with basic items like pints of fruit, cherry tomatoes and things that don't require a lot of cooking, but we also saw that frozen vegetables, hot dogs and toilet paper were very popular items," Chef Selick says. "Any trip to the grocery store that we can save them right now is key, especially as shelves are going bare." The mini-market has become so popular, in fact, that he has informed his supervisors it might need to become a permanent service – pandemic or not.

Healthcare foodservice disaster menus are required by the joint commission and are typically developed with the assumption that there is no power or water because of a hurricane

or other natural disaster. In a pandemic, there's plenty of water and electricity, but labor and supplies might be scarce. As such, disaster menus roll through fresh food stores first, moving on to frozen next, and then on to canned and dry goods.

In terms of labor, although Selick's full team was currently in place at press time, he still had to prepare for a possibly reduced workforce if anyone were to get sick or needed to self-quarantine. In the case of a full-scale disaster, instead of offering a full menu, Selick plans to offer just the daily special or something easy like sandwiches or casseroles to streamline production. Selick has also trained his team to prepare and deliver meals for larger groups at one time using paper bags and platters, rather than serving just nine patients at a time using carts, as they usually do. Though hospitals typically have deals with their vendors to receive food supplies first in a disaster, Selick has made some last-minute calls to a few food manufacturers to lineup additional food and supplies, just in case. Other lines of communication have opened; decisions that typically take nine months with corporate now take just a few days.

What hasn't changed, however, is Selick's commitment to high-quality food. "We're not serving MREs or junk or institutional food here," says Selick. "Our philosophy is and always has been about providing the most nutritious, wholesome enjoyable and delicious meals."

As the public stays home to help "flatten the curve" and ease the burden on healthcare workers, Selick remains steadfast on flattening his own curve with extra planning and preparation. A few weeks ago, he might not have been able to say this, but he does now with gusto: "We are prepped. We are ready."

This is the new reality of healthcare foodservice.



Chef John Selick works with his staff to prepare meals for the day.