

## Lee County Health Department

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### HEALTH DEPARTMENT IS SAFETY NET UNDER DINING OUT, MARCH 2004

Dining out is an activity most of us thoroughly enjoy. When you go out for a meal, does food safety ever cross your mind? Probably not – most of us take for granted that we can enjoy safe dining. This is an aspect of public health that people may not consider unless a problem arises. If a food-borne illness outbreak occurs, we are well aware of the potential hazards of unsafe food handling. When an outbreak hasn't occurred for awhile, when things are going well, people may forget that their local public health department is on the front lines, doing regular food inspections, to protect your health and safety. This is an ongoing process and we at the Lee County Health Department never become complacent about food safety.

Although the U.S. has the safest food supply in the world, it is not invincible. In Illinois, it is estimated that up to 250,000 cases of food borne illness may occur each year. However, because some of these illnesses can be quite mild and the vast majority of them occur in the home, many go unreported. Yet food borne illness can lead to serious complications and even death. Safe food handling at home in your own kitchen is very important. That is your responsibility – however, if you have questions about food safety, feel free to call the Lee County Health Department and ask for Paul, Tim or Jen. We are always happy to be of assistance.

Ensuring safe food handling in eating establishments – food sanitation – is one of the many responsibilities of the Lee County Health Department. We are required by the Illinois Department of Public Health to license food establishments, ensure that an adequate number of individuals working in the facilities are certified in food sanitation, conduct regular food safety inspections, and investigate complaints.

Because we have a regulatory role, we may sometimes be seen in a negative light. We hope to avoid this, because it is our mission to protect the public, and in doing so, assist facilities to the extent possible to correct problems. The better our relationship with a facility owner and employees, the easier our job is to help them make necessary corrections. In doing the required inspections, we follow both Lee County and State of Illinois codes for Food and Food Establishments.

The frequency of inspections in a facility depends on the level of risk assigned to a facility. In other words, a full service restaurant must be inspected more times per year than a tavern that sells pre-packaged items. The inspection process that takes place is very comprehensive and looks at many different aspects of a facility. Items such as expiration dates on food, proper labeling and dating, clean food equipment and utensils, water, sewage and plumbing, hand washing facilities, garbage disposal, insect and rodent control, floors, walls and ceilings, lighting, ventilation, and rest rooms are all examined during an inspection. Some of the more critical

issues examined are temperature monitoring of food, avoiding cross contamination of foods, and proper hand washing by all personnel.

If problems are identified during the inspection, the inspector will explain the violations as well as suggestions for correcting the problems. The role of the inspector is not only to identify existing problems, but to provide education and offer suggestions for correction. The inspector must make a judgment as to whether he or she believes the violations will be corrected in a timely manner or whether there are problems so severe that the facility's license must be suspended until such time as an administrative meeting can take place between health department staff and facility owners/managers to devise a plan for corrective actions.

The inspectors are quite happy when a facility scores high - that means their hard work of educating food workers is paying off. It also makes their jobs easier. Having to return to facilities to do reinspections to determine if problems were corrected is time consuming. Our inspectors are very dedicated to the food safety process and will go out of their way to assist food workers or owners/managers in making positive changes.

You may have read in this paper, our monthly listing of food establishments which have scored well on recent inspections. We run this to reward facilities for doing a good job. Again, our role is to promote safe food handling and to assist with problems. We prefer to see ourselves as educators rather than a regulatory agency. However, if an owner or manager fails to show a good effort in correcting the problem, or we see a risk to the public, we will not hesitate to take the necessary action. My point is that it makes our lives and jobs easier when we all work together to ensure proper and safe food handling.

If you work in a restaurant, the next time you see the inspector, don't despair. Think of the inspection as an opportunity to show off your knowledge and good practices. If you are a customer and you see the inspector, be glad that the Lee County Health Department is conducting regular inspections of the facilities you frequent. Also - if you are at an establishment and see something that you feel is not being done correctly, let us know. After all, our inspectors are only in the establishment during inspections - a very small percentage of the time the establishment operates throughout the year. If you have any questions about this or any other health department issue, feel free to call us at 284-3371. You can also email us questions at [contactus@lchd.com](mailto:contactus@lchd.com).

-Submitted by Cathy Ferguson, MPH, Public Health Administrator