

Health Department inspects restaurants to protect you from food-borne illness

Many people know that the El Paso County Department of Health and Environment inspects restaurants, grocery stores, delis and other retail food establishments. But do you know why? We inspect restaurants because one of our missions is to protect you and your family from food-borne illness. You should know, however, that our ability to protect you is increasingly impaired by funding shortfalls. We will come back to that point.

First, the goal of the Health Department is to conduct two unannounced inspections of every retail food establishment—ranging from fine-dining restaurants to hot-dog stands—per year. In enforcing the Colorado State Regulations, our Health Department inspectors are looking for food storage, handling, preparation and serving practices that could cause outbreaks of food-borne illness such as *Salmonella* and *E. coli*. Most food-borne illnesses are caused by bacteria or viruses that can be present in raw food but killed by proper cooking.

A majority of food-borne illnesses are due to five factors:

- Improper food cooling for storage
- Too long of time lapse between food preparation and serving
- The presence of a person who is ill, such as a cook or prep cook, or poor personal hygiene, such as poor hand-washing.
- Inadequate reheating of food before serving
- Improper holding temperatures of hot foods before serving

These are the same things that could go wrong in your kitchen at home, yet the potential in a public setting to make a large number of people sick is much greater.

How sick? As you may know, food-borne illness can cause vomiting and diarrhea, and in rare cases, death. In fact, 76 million people are estimated to have contracted food-borne illnesses every year in the United States, 235,000 needed hospitalization and 5,000 people have died from food-borne illness.

In El Paso County, the number of food safety-related complaints about restaurants is rising—from 60 in 2005 to 219 in 2007—and the Health Department received 150 additional complaints in 2007 from people who felt they got sick from eating at a restaurant. While the Health Department can't connect a lack of inspections to specific illnesses, these numbers are cause for concern.

You can see the value of educating food service workers and enforcing public health codes. During an inspection, a violation can be determined to be critical – requiring immediate correction, usually while the inspector is present, or non-critical, usually related to equipment maintenance or general facility cleanliness. Just one critical violation causes a business to receive an unsatisfactory review and triggers a follow-up inspection if the problem isn't corrected on the spot.

Remember how I said it is the Health Department's goal to conduct two routine inspections per year? In fact, that's the state requirement. Yet in 2007, our Health Department wasn't able to conduct even half of the state-required routine inspections. That is because our Health Department can only afford to employ the equivalent of eight full time inspectors for restaurants, compared to what the federal government recommends, which is 15 to 16 inspectors.

The Health Department can't hire more restaurant inspectors because of a lack of local funding. To fund more food inspectors, the Health Department would have to cut back on other critical functions that also are short-staffed. In 2007, for example, a lack of funding forced the Health Department to cut back on trapping and testing of mosquitoes for West Nile virus. An

especially bad year for influenza in 2003 and a couple of large tuberculosis investigations in 2006 and 2007 required the Health Department to pull staff from other crucial functions. We are reaching the point where the Health Department has little ability to flex, and that stands to put the community at risk.

In the months ahead, I will tell you about other essential Health Department responsibilities. The Health Department is committed to promoting and protecting public health and environmental quality in our community, and we need you to partner with us.

When dining out, here's what you can do to help protect yourself:

- Order your meat and poultry cooked well done, and send it back if it's pink.
- Discard "doggie bags" if left out more than two hours, and be sure to reheat thoroughly to eat. Eat within three days, or toss out.
- Share your concerns with the proprietor if you see food-handling techniques that concern you.
- To communicate a concern about food-safety practices at a restaurant or food service establishment, call the Health Department at (719) 575-8635 or visit www.elpasocountyhealth.org.

Did you know...more than 70 percent of restaurant inspections result in at least one "critical" public health violation, requiring a follow-up inspection.

Source: The New Falcon Herald, February 2008