

Local Health Department Roles in Food Safety: Background

What roles do local health departments play in keeping food safe?

- The thousands of local health departments across the country are on the front lines of food safety, with key roles in both prevention and response.
- Local health departments are an essential part of the national food safety system. They are responsible for food inspections in restaurants, grocery stores, daycare facilities, hospitals, schools and some food manufacturing plants, and they also investigate consumer complaints.
- When food products are found to be unsafe, local health departments initiate recalls—getting the word out to both businesses and consumers to ensure that these products are pulled from the shelves.
- When a new restaurant opens, local health departments are responsible for training employees on safe food handling practices.
- Local agencies carry out food safety laboratory functions—collecting and testing food and human samples—in some jurisdictions. (In others, laboratory functions are done by state agencies.)
- Seventy-five percent of local health departments have food safety education programs. For example:
 - Providing food safety education to food handlers and operators
 - Working with food service establishments to provide proper re-heating and preparation for carry-out food
 - Educating communities during recalls and outbreaks on how to safely handle food and avoid getting sick
- Local health departments have diverse teams, usually including nurses, epidemiologists, environmental health specialists, health educators, and others, working on food safety issues every day.

Examples of local food safety at work:

- **Boston:** After identifying a cluster of salmonella cases among residents of Boston's Chinese communities, the Boston Public Health Commission developed a survey to identify the source. The survey identified live poultry markets in Boston as the potential source of salmonella. Inspections identified a number of unsafe practices that could have contributed to the illnesses.

These findings resulted in improvements in retail practices in Boston's live poultry markets. In addition, this investigation identified high risk food handling practices in the Chinese community. The Boston Public Health Commission held a food safety summit with community members to identify knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs related food safety. Based on this summit, BPHC produced a food safety video for this community in both Cantonese and Mandarin.

- **Golden, Colorado:** In July 2007, the Jefferson County Department of Health & Environment investigated a widespread E. coli outbreak in a jail detention center that infected 12% of the jail's 1,200 inmates.

Once it was alerted to the problem, the health department investigated and traced the outbreak to a small group of inmates tasked with preparing and serving more than 4,000 meals each day. The health department implemented infection control measures within the detention center and brought in uninfected inmates from other facilities for food preparation and services while this jail's inmate food handlers could be isolated, monitored for symptom development and tested for the organism.

In addition, the health department tracked down more than 1,500 recently-released inmates who might have been infected prior to discovery of the outbreak. Officials feared that these people would unknowingly infect others if they took jobs in food service or patient care, so they undertook an intense effort to identify and screen as many in this group as possible.

How do local health departments fit into plans to reform the national food safety system (creation of a new food agency separate from FDA, etc.)?

- NACCHO supports the development of a science-based system to assure food safety that recognizes and assures the essential role played by, and participation of, local public health departments.
- NACCHO supports improvements that make the food safety system more integrated: federal agencies such as the FDA and USDA need to be able to work effectively with state and local government public health departments.
- Federal agencies need to take advantage of state and local resources, such as their ability to carry out inspections, investigate and responds to outbreaks and initiate local food recalls, but must also hold states and local agencies accountable to ensure that they are protecting the public.
- For more information on the important roles that state and local health agencies play in the national food safety system, please see “Stronger Partnerships for Safer Food: An Agenda for Strengthening State and Local Roles in the Nation’s Food Safety System,” a report produced jointly by the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, NACCHO, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO).

Will health department budget cuts increase people’s risk of foodborne illness?

- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other federal agencies can see trends and patterns over time—i.e. where outbreaks are occurring—if the local health departments gather “good” information and pass it along. But these data must be accurate, reliable and comprehensive in order for agencies to use them to design programs, make decisions or develop policies. These data are at risk because of job losses and workforce shortages in local and state government.