

STORY FROM THE FIELD

Montrose County Health & Human Services— Montrose, CO

Population Served: 40,539

Montrose County Health and Human Services is the silent guardian of the more than 40,000 community members that it serves. Each time its residents dine in a local food establishment, the health department works quietly behind the scenes, ensuring that the food is safe to eat. Countless individuals sip from public water fountains each day, confident that the water they drink is clean and potable.

But due to ongoing budget cuts, the citizens of Montrose may soon find themselves unable to take these protections for granted.

Consider the health department's role as regulator of its 510 food establishments, which include schools, retail food outlets, and child care centers. The state of Colorado requires Montrose to conduct 752 total inspections of these establishments this year. With just four staff in its environmental health and food safety program, the health department has long struggled to maintain compliance with the state for these inspections. The situation went from bad to worse last year when budget cuts forced Montrose to reduce the working hours of three of these employees. Environmental health specialist, Richard Thompson, estimates that they will complete only half of these required inspections. For the public, that translates into 376 opportunities for a serious violation to fall through the cracks.

The food safety component of Montrose's environmental health program also serves a few neighboring counties, and these cuts jeopardize the health of these residents too. As Deputy Director, Diana Williams, notes, "[Because we travel], we have to somehow lower the standards of what was expected for those other counties...and we can't do the total number of inspections required for each establishment." Now, rather than conducting two inspections per year and following up as needed, the health department conducts just one and follows up "as time allows."

Because food safety inspections produce revenue, these cuts exacerbate the health department's budget crisis. As Williams explains, "With food safety we also get reimbursed based on the total number of establishments we inspect, so if we don't meet the expected number from the state, then we receive less

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—Richard Thompson, Environmental Health Specialist

revenue." This creates a downward spiral as less revenue now means even fewer inspections in the future.

According to Thompson, the capacity of the health department to protect its community from foodborne pathogens is decreasing as the need for protection increases. "When I was growing up, spinach, tomatoes, and cantaloupes didn't make people sick," he said. "Then in the nineties we found out that E. coli kills kids. Then this year we had 29 people die from eating cantaloupes in the U.S. Because our food supply is now global, and because we see pathogens changing and reappearing with new risks, our food supply is inherently more dangerous than in the past."

Local health departments are the first line of defense in the process that ensures that food is safe to eat at home, at community events, in restaurants, and in schools. Between January 2009 and June 2010, an estimated 21 percent of local health departments nationwide responded to major foodborne disease outbreaks. Program and staffing cuts compromise the ability of local health departments to respond to these crises, jeopardizing the health of the communities they serve.

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