

Invest in Iowa's Food Safety System

Position Statement

Policy Recommendations:

- Increase food-licensing fees to fully fund food safety program activities in compliance with Iowa Code.
- Authorize DIA to administer the food licensing fees through the Iowa Administrative Code.
- Establish an automatic fee adjustment mechanism to annually increase fees by the percentage increase in the consumer price index.
- Create parity between license fees for retail food and food service establishments.
- And reduce the burden on taxpayers

Background:

The inadequacy of food code licensing fees has resulted in a systematic degradation of Iowa's food inspection system and jeopardizes the health of Iowans and our economy. Current license fees fail to cover program costs. Since 1979, fees were increased slightly in 1997 and 2008 while program costs have risen exponentially. Some counties subsidize as much as 50% of their food program costs. With the pending commercial property tax reductions, local public health agencies will be assessing service delivery. Some locally contracted programs have already discontinued their food inspection program because it is a fiscal liability. Examples of counties that have discontinued all or portions of their contracts with the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA) are Polk, Jasper, Cerro Gordo and Shelby. This situation results in the state indirectly incurring increased costs since local programs are more cost effective. Unlike local programs, DIA receives a state appropriation that equals 85% of the food license fees collected and deposited in the general fund; DIA is permitted to retain the inspection fees collected in counties that have discontinued inspection contracting since 2009. In 2009, DIA inspectors worked in 23 of Iowa's 99 counties; today DIA inspectors work in 52.

For more than a decade, DIA and some local programs have not had the resources to meet the frequency of restaurant inspections established by the FDA. In recent years, DIA has reduced the minimum food inspection frequencies twice. In 2009, inspections were to occur once or twice a year depending on facility risk. In 2011, inspections shifted to every six to 24 months depending on risk. The erosion of Iowa's food safety program is a direct result of inadequate food license fees. When the 2014 legislature failed to increase fees, DIA revised its rules extending frequencies to 36 months for some facilities. Most facilities are inspected every 18 months. Some local inspection programs strive for greater frequency to protect the health of the public.

The public believes these assessments occur on a much more regular basis and therefore may have a false sense of safety from foodborne disease. Inadequate and irregular license fee increases are starving Iowa's food safety system and have the potential to put the health and lives of the consuming public at risk.

There is more to the Iowa food program than simply conducting a food safety evaluation. The program requires working with the establishment to develop a corrective action plan, conducting follow up visits to ensure all items have been corrected and investigating complaints from the public. Staff must also conduct plan reviews and on-site visits prior to the opening of an establishment and review documentation to ensure the establishment is in compliance with its operating procedures. Adherence to FDA's *National Voluntary Retail Food Program Standards* expands the capabilities and competencies of facility inspectors as well. When adequately funded and executed, a modernized food inspection program is vastly improved through conformance with these standards.

Iowa's food inspection program simply cannot provide the level of professional food safety services that Iowans expect and that are required by modern standards without the proper investment.

For more information, contact:

Eric Bradley

Phone: 563-326-8618

E-mail: ericbradley30252@yahoo.com