



Black Hawk County Board of Health

Position on the Sustainability of the Retail Food Safety Program in Iowa

Background and Findings:

All Iowans expect and anticipate that the food they eat from public sources is wholesome and meets sanitary standards. They assume and expect that food establishments are inspected with adequate frequency. The responsibility for the food safety system in Iowa is vested in the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA) which inspects facilities with their own personnel or via contracts with local public health agencies.

Over the past few years DIA has twice reduced the inspection frequencies of establishments in response to budgetary pressures. It also has provided guidelines to the contracting agencies for assigning risk which lowers some risk categories. Under the current system, many full service restaurants are only inspected every 24 months and other food retailers every 36 months.

License fees have only been adjusted twice in the last 35 years and neither adequately covered program costs. Since 2008, the gap between stagnant revenue and increasing costs has caused some local agencies to discontinue their contracts with DIA. In 2009, DIA inspected 23 counties. Today, DIA inspects 52. The DIA has not been able to keep pace with the reacquisition of these territories and has been limited in its ability to hire additional staff due to inadequate license fees. This has resulted in further reductions in inspection frequencies. This threatens the integrity of the entire food safety system in Iowa.

The Black Hawk County Health Department has long believed that food safety and sanitation is best attained through local inspections. Local agencies are efficient and timely with the review and issuing of licenses, inspection frequencies can be higher because travel time is minimized, response time to complaints is shorter and food borne outbreak investigations can begin within minutes of a report. Constantly shrinking local government resources, including reduced commercial property tax revenues, are making it more difficult for local agencies to provide this important public health function.

It is important to keep in mind that a modern, science-based food safety program is more than just routine inspections. Food safety specialists educate, develop corrective action plans, conduct follow up visits, respond to complaints and review facility plans prior to openings. Today's inspection system is vastly improved and more advanced than twenty years ago and requires a higher degree of education, training and time.

Policy Recommendations:

In light of the findings, above, the Black Hawk County Board of Health encourages the Iowa Legislature and Governor to work together to preserve Iowa's Retail Food Safety Program by taking the following actions:

- Support passage of HF 344 by Koester and/or SF265 by Dotzler

Thank You

Approved by Acclamation: February 25, 2015