



July 15, 2009

## Program serves food safety help

### Legislators hungry for federal funding

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*The Enquirer*

When unsafe food slips through the supply chain, it can cause expensive recalls for food companies, not to mention illness and death in consumers.

Recent advances in DNA technology have empowered food inspectors to more accurately identify the source of food-borne illnesses. Sometimes they can pinpoint a particular batch of peanut butter or an employee who failed to wash his hands, for example.

But a lack of federal coordination to standardize education and testing procedures nationally has left food companies and inspectors frustrated with inconsistent results.

"One of the things that's happening right now around the world is retailers are demanding that the food they sell is safe," said Gerald Wojtala, past president of the Association of Food and Drug Officials.

So the AFDO, in association with the W.K. Kellogg Institute, Battle Creek Unlimited and area universities, is attempting to standardize food safety training for inspectors nationally.

It is beginning here in Battle Creek with the formation of the International Food Protection Training Institute, which is holding its first course, "Managing Retail Food Safety," Tuesday through Thursday this week.

The AFDO is using seed money from the Kellogg Foundation to create a standard curriculum for each stage of an inspector's career. Its goal is to get federal sources to start funding the institute within a few years, Wojtala said.

There are individual training courses out there, but often health officials don't have the money to send their inspectors, he said.

Federal funding for the International Food Protection Training Institute would allow more inspectors to receive training that they could use anywhere in the United States, he said.

Congress is working on bills that would fund food safety training institutes to the tune of \$30 million to \$50 million over a five-year period.

U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Bedford Township, said that the 2010 Agriculture Appropriations bill, which passed the House last week, included \$1 million for the International Food Protection Training Institute. The bill now goes to the Senate for consideration.

"It was the largest new start, meaning a new project, funded in that appropriations bill," Schauer said. "That was a major accomplishment."

Language also has been added to a food safety bill in the House that would authorize the FDA to fund one or more food protection training institutes in the long term. Schauer said the bill is gaining support across party lines.

"This is a small amount of the FDA's budget but for a very significant function that can be provided right here in Battle Creek," Schauer said.

Although the bill could not specify the Battle Creek institute as the funding recipient, it is in a good position to receive the funding if approved, he said.

Sens. Debbie Stabenow and Carl Levin are working on similar legislation in the Senate.

"So that we can be assured that they are doing the same kind of inspections here in Michigan as someone's doing in Mississippi or California or New York or anywhere," Wojtala said.

About 100 public health inspectors, mostly from Michigan, are in Battle Creek this week to learn about the Food and Drug Administration's newest inspection model.

The model focuses on communication and education, said Bob Overley, field services coordinator for the Calhoun County Public Health Department.

"It's kind of the next step in training," he said. "Basically, how you talk to the operators in plain English."

Becky Krzyzanowski, who trains food inspectors for the Michigan Department of Agriculture, said there is a need for consolidated and consistent training even among state inspectors.

The food code, which details food safety procedures in Michigan, is left open to interpretation because no two situations are exactly the same, she said. The problem is when food inspectors end up having widely different operating procedures.

"You get off on a wrong track and there's never anybody there to bring you back on the right one," Krzyzanowski said. "(It happens) all the time."

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