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Stabenow, Vilsack praise International Food Protection Training Institute during visit

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The International Food Protection Training Institute won praise from federal officials in Battle Creek on Monday who were here to meet with representatives of the food safety nonprofit.

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack met with officials from the institute, its funders, partners and city officials at the downtown Kendall Center on a stop that was part of an agriculture-focused tour of West Michigan.

The institute opened in 2009 with help from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. It has also received \$1 million in grant money from the federal Food and Drug Administration.

Vilsack praised the institute for having trained some 1,700 food safety workers from around the country, and he called the institute a good example of private-public partnerships.

"I think it is a model for how we do business in the future with constrained resources," he said.

One goal of the institute is to become the leader in providing standardized national food safety training.

"It really is amazing that there has not been a national training center for food inspection ever in this country, but it should be here in Battle Creek," said Stabenow, a Democrat who chairs the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Last year Congress passed a food safety bill that included language supporting training for food inspectors. Stabenow said she's now watching those initiatives being implemented and looking for ways to improve them.

The federal farm bill, which Congress will debate next year, will offer another opportunity to support food safety by backing related research, Stabenow and Vilsack said.

Stabenow said it will be a challenge to keep funding for agriculture research in the federal budget. A budget passed by the U.S. House but not yet taken up by the Senate makes substantial cuts, she said.

"The House has a very different view and has really laid the groundwork for cuts in agriculture across the board," she said.

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