



CITY OF HOUSTON

Houston Department of Health and Human Services

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To: Houston Caterers
From: David Perse, MD
Public Health Authority for the City of Houston

The Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS) interacts with food establishments in two ways: licensing and inspection of establishments and investigation of food borne illness complaints. While you may be very familiar with the licensing and inspection aspect of HDHHS, you may be less aware of food borne investigations.

Due to the nature of catered events, **caterers are at higher risk of being associated with food borne illness than any other types of food establishment.** Captive diners eating the same foods at the same time from a single vendor are more likely to discuss their illness among the group and report illness to HDHHS. As a caterer, it is in your interest and the interest of your customers to take every precaution to reduce the risk of food borne illness.

There are two basic types of caterers: those who prepare food for drop-off or pickup and those who provide sit-down service at fixed locations such as convention centers, hotels and banquet halls. Due to the volume of production and the uncertainty of service times, in some cases, both of these kinds of events are fraught with food borne illness hazards which, if left uncorrected, may result in illness, medical costs, subsequent lawsuits and negative media attention. Managers cope with many problems: absenteeism, turnover, pressure to meet productions schedules and inadequate facilities to keep hazardous foods at safe temperatures. Such challenges can lead to shortcuts in sanitation, which, in turn, can lead to sanitation breakdowns and lack of oversight of food temperatures.

Well-trained, knowledgeable managers are the key to food safety. Managers should pre-plan events for large groups in order to prevent taking shortcuts or allowing employees to by-pass rules for expediency on the day of production. Pre-planning also includes making the customer aware of and accountable for delivery/service time and temperatures. Customers should be made aware of the temperatures at the time of delivery/service and possibly sign a form agreeing to the observed temperatures at the time of service. Prior to the event, the customer should also be provided with written instructions for the proper cooling and reheating of any food that is taken home from the event. Pre-planning is essential for the delivery of safe, wholesome food to the public.

Pre-planning includes providing adequate insulated facilities such as refrigerated trucks, coolers, warming units to hold large quantities of hot and cold potentially hazardous foods at the proper temperature from receipt to service. It also includes designating a person to be in charge of taking the internal temperatures of potentially hazardous foods during storage, preparation, cooking, holding and delivery of the meal. Not only should this person take the temperatures with a clean, sanitized digital or dial thermometer, this person should also record the times and temperatures along with any corrective action taken on time-temperature logs. The person in charge can later verify the validity of these logs. Well-kept time-temperature logs are paramount in demonstrating that the food was handled properly from receipt to service.

In planning the next event, also keep the following items in mind for preventing contamination and properly controlling temperatures:

- Do not allow employees with illness symptoms such as diarrhea, vomiting, discharges from the eyes, nose or mouth to handle foods. The Houston Food Ordinance requires employees to report these symptoms to the person in charge and requires that the person in charge restrict or exclude food handlers with these symptoms.
- Employees should be allowed to take breaks so that they will not eat, drink or smoke at their production station. A break area should be designated away from food preparation and utensil washing areas.
- Employees should wash their hands and the exposed portions of their arms for twenty seconds as often as possible in the food handling areas and utensil washing areas. If handling ready-to-eat food with their bare hands, they should apply a sanitizer or use gloves or utensils.
- Employees should always use clean utensils and wash them between cutting different foods.
- Wash, rinse and sanitize cutting boards after use for raw meats and before use for ready-to-eat foods. Consider using disposable cutting boards or have separate cutting boards for raw foods that will be cooked and for ready-to-eat foods, such as bread, fresh fruits, vegetables and cooked meats.
- Completely cook potentially hazardous foods and hold them at safe temperatures of 41°F or below or 140°F or above. During a production rush, time-temperature rules should not be ignored. Bacteria will incubate and grow rapidly in meats, sauces and gravy left at room temperature. At no time during the production schedule should potentially hazardous food be kept in the danger zone or 41°F to 140°F for more than two hours.

Accountability of managers and customers, pre-planning of sanitation and adherence to basic food safety rules will help prevent future food borne illness outbreaks. Both managers and customers have important roles in protecting the safety of catered food. If you have any questions or need assistance, please feel free to contact Chirag Bhatt at 713-794-9206 or Carolyn Gray at 713-794-9242.

Sincerely,



David Persse, MD
City of Houston Public Health Authority