

Food Safety for Catering

Revised June 2014 from Letter to Englewood Retail Food Establishments/Caterers dated 9/5/12

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 the Health Department. As a caterer or retail food establishment, 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 (2) basic types of caterers: those who prepare food for drop-off or pick-up, 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. Food managers cope with many problems: absenteeism, turnover, pressure to meet production schedules, and inadequate facilities to keep potentially hazardous foods at safe temperatures. Such challenges can lead to short cuts in sanitation, which, in turn, can lead to sanitation breakdowns and lack of oversight of food temperatures.

Well-trained, knowledgeable food managers are the key to food safety. Food 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 of 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 must also record the times and temperatures along with any corrective action taken on a time-temperature log as mandated by New Jersey State Chapter 24 (N.J.A.C. 8:24-3.5 (g), "Sanitation in Retail Food Establishments and Food and Beverage Vending Machines". 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.

Chapter 24 (N.J.A.C. 8:24-3.5 (g)) on Limitation of growth of organisms of public health concern stipulates that "If time only, rather than time in conjunction with temperature, is used as the public health control for a working supply of potentially hazardous food before cooking, or for ready-to-eat potentially hazardous food that is displayed or held for service for immediate consumption: 1. The food shall be marked or otherwise identified to indicate the time that is four hours past the point in time when the food is removed from temperature control; 2. The food shall be cooked and served, served if ready-to-eat, or discarded, within four hours from the point in time when the food is removed from temperature control; 3. The food in unmarked containers or packages or marked to exceed a four hour limit shall be discarded; and 4. Written procedures shall be submitted to the health authority for approval prior to using time as a public health control and shall be maintained in the retail food establishment to ensure compliance with: i. Paragraphs (g) 1 through 3 above; and ii. Subsection (d) above, for food that is prepared, cooked, and refrigerated before time is used as the public health control."

Effective October 15, 2012, all Englewood retail food establishments and food caterers are required to maintain time-temperature logs as described above in compliance with New Jersey State Chapter 24 (N.J.A.C. 8:24-3.5 (g)). Retail food establishments and caterers found to be in non-compliance by Health Inspectors of not recording the times and temperatures along with any corrective action taken on time-temperature logs will be issued a summons and be subject to a penalty of not less than \$60 and not more than \$500 for each offense as determined by the court. A temperature log has been provided for your use.

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 Health Department 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 always wash their hands and the exposed portions of their arms for at least twenty (20) seconds as often as possible in the food handling areas and utensil washing areas. If handling ready-to-eat food, they must either use gloves or utensils (tongs); handling with bare hands is prohibited .
- Employees must 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 and 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 of 41°F to 140° F for more than two (2) hours.

Accountability of food managers and customers, pre-planning of sanitation, and adherence to basic food safety rules will help prevent food borne illness outbreaks. Both food managers and customers have important roles in protecting the safety of food by retail food establishments and caterers in the City of Englewood. If you have any questions or need assistance, please feel free to contact either Health Inspector Priscilla Lewis at 201-871-6510 or Health Inspector Jennifer Franco at 201-871-6514.