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The Quarterly Food Safety Newsletter of the Alexandria Health Department

Bon Appétit

The New Silver Platter Award

Consumers have grown increasingly concerned with the safety of their food due to the number of foodborne illness outbreaks and recalls recently reported in the media. Here is your chance to show consumers and the community that food safety is a priority in your establishment. Beginning this year, the Alexandria Food Safety Advisory Council (AFSAC) will start awarding the prestigious Silver Platter Award. The AFSAC, established in 2007, is comprised of leaders in industry, academia, regulatory agencies and concerned consumers. The Council developed this award in order to recognize industry excellence in food safety and to encourage foodservice employees to make food safety a priority.

Each year, the AFSAC will determine a new theme for the award. This year, the council has chosen employee health to be the theme. Sick foodservice employees have the potential to make many consumers ill in a very short period of time. The cost of having such an outbreak at your establishment can be devastating. In 2000, a Washington restaurant paid for Immune globulin shots for over 1,300 customers who had eaten there within a two week period. This action was taken after discovering that a food employee had been handling ready-to-eat foods while infected with hepatitis A. The injections cost $200 per person. In addition, several people who contracted the virus received settlements of between $25,000 and $75,000 each. The AFSAC encourages you to develop an employee health policy, not only to comply with food regulations, but in order to protect your business.

In order to receive a Silver Platter Award, food establishments will need to develop a written employee health policy meeting current Health Department requirements and a person-in-charge must verbally demonstrate an understanding of the policy to an Environmental Health Specialist.

The basic components of a written employee health policy will include reporting requirements, exclusion and restriction requirements, and procedures for removal, adjustment or extension of exclusions and restrictions. There are several internet resources available to guide the development of your employee health policy. Go to www.alexandriava.gov/health/info/default.aspx?id=11442 and click on "Food Service Employee Health Policy." There you will find detailed information about the requirements of an employee health policy, an easy-to-understand decision tree, and a sample employee reporting agreement.

When your Employee Health Policy is complete and the persons-in-charge understand how it works, contact your Environmental Health Specialist to determine if you qualify for the Silver Platter Award. There is no limit to the number of awards distributed. So don't be shy, just give it a try!

Stop! Can You Really Do That?

Is your food establishment currently doing any of the following: smoking, curing, or including additives to food in order to preserve, prolong shelf-life or be able to keep foods out at room temperature; sealing foods in oxygen-limiting packaging such as done in reduced oxygen, modified atmospheric packaging, controlled atmospheric packaging, vacuum packaging, cook-chill or sous vide methods; keeping oysters, mussels, clams or scallops alive in a tank before service; custom processing animals for personal use, not for sale or service in the food establishment; or sprouting seeds or beans?

"...Specialized processes involve a high level of risk and may require special permission ... from the Health Department."

If your answer was yes, contact your Environmental Health Specialist immediately. These specialized processes involve a high level of risk and may require special permission, in the form of a variance, from the Health Department. A variance is a written authorization from the Health Department that allows a food establishment to proceed with processes that would normally be prohibited by food regulations. A variance will be granted if the Health Department determines that a health hazard would not be created by these processes. In some circumstances, your Environmental Health Specialist can tell you how to continue your process without needing to apply for a variance. For example, restaurants can often proceed with reduced oxygen packaging, cook-chill or sous vide methods by simply adjusting procedures, developing a HACCP plan and installing temperature monitoring equipment.

To be considered for a variance, your food establishment will need to supply a written request stating the section of the food regulations that the establishment wants the variance applied to, an analysis of how health hazards normally reduced by the regulations will be alternatively addressed by the establishment's proposed procedure, and a HACCP plan, if required. The Health Department may request additional information if necessary to properly assess health hazards.

There are many risks involved in some specialized methods of food preparation. Seed sprouts were implicated in 24 outbreaks of Salmonella and E. coli from 1998 to 2004 according to the FDA. Curing mixes contain sodium nitrate or sodium nitrite which can be lethal if consumed in large doses. Reduced-oxygen packaging creates an ideal environment for the growth Clostridium botulinum bacteria. C. botulinum can produce a toxin that remains in food even after cooking. If ingested, this toxin can lead to paralysis and death if not treated. If you are not sure whether your establishment needs a variance, please contact your Environmental Health Specialist for further guidance.