

What happens if your customers get sick...and they blame you?

A foodborne illness crisis can strike any food service establishment at any time, regardless of how well it's run. It may not be your fault, but the buck stops at your door. In fact, with food safety getting so much attention in the media, the likelihood for a problem-or the accusation that you have a problem-has grown.

Have a Plan in Place

A contingency plan should account for the following: 1) getting reliable information on what happened, 2) dealing with the immediate problem, 3) tracing the cause of what happened and 4) reaching a conclusion.

Getting to the bottom of what actually occurred during an alleged foodborne incident requires careful pre-planning. When one does occur, emotions will run high, pressure to come up with a problem and solution will be intense and facts will often be hard to come by, unlike rumors, which will be epidemic.

What you will need to find out is: what happened, to whom, when, and where. For this step, having a pre-prepared Record of Complaint form is very helpful because it documents all the pertinent facts. Together with your ongoing food handling records, it will be a powerful tool for sorting out what actually happened.

Tracing the cause of a foodborne illness incident is much like detective work. You have to interview the principals (the victim if possible, as well as your employees who were on duty at the time and others who may have eaten the same food at the same time), secure "evidence" (samples of the suspected food item, if available) and review records (sales data, production documentation, etc.). Document all of your steps.

Checklist for Handling a Foodborne Illness Incident

- Graciously accept the complaint.
- Secure all pertinent data, such as name, address, phone number, date, time, meal, contents of meal, when and where the food was purchased/served, if food was eaten when purchased, or refrigerated, when symptoms occurred, the names of any others who ate the same food, whether medical attention was sought, and if so, the name(s) of the physician.
- Take a food history from the complainant, if possible, of all meals, condiments and beverages consumed day of illness and at least three days prior to illness.
- Listen carefully to the complaint. Don't admit liability or offer medical advice. Don't diagnose or suggest symptoms. Don't introduce symptoms. Record only what the person has said. Note the time the symptoms started and remember to remain polite and concerned.
- Try to preserve a sample of the suspected food for later microbiological testing. Label and store (refrigerate or freeze) and temporarily remove item from sales.
- Evaluate the complaint. Is it only one person, or are there multiple complainants? Does it describe a legitimate illness? What is the attitude of the complainant?
- Contact the appropriate people: the owner, general manager, risk management, etc.

- ❑ Contact the local health department (follow the regulations for the individual county). Allow inspectors to inspect the property, be ready to provide requested data and be cooperative.
- ❑ Review the information and start an internal investigation which may include checking all temperature charts, checking with all employees to see if anyone was ill at time of incident, checking for complaints from the entire staff, comparing notes determine if anything is new/different, such as new food items on the menu, new supplier, or new employee, checking environment sanitation, checking date of pest control, and checking to determine if new chemicals are being used.
- ❑ Also review how long the suspected food was in storage, who prepared it, what ingredients were used, what cooking temperature was used and how long was it cooked, and how long was it held before service.
- ❑ Take corrective action as appropriate. Review outcome with all managers and staff. Change policies and procedures, and make corrections, as appropriate.

For more information or to schedule a certified food handler's course, please call Fidelity Loss Control Management (FLCM) at (805) 434-5687 or on the web at www.flcm.net.