PUBLIC HEALTH

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Position on the Sustainability of the Retail Food Safety Program In Iowa

Background and Findings:
All Iowans expect and anticipate that the food they eat from public sources is wholesome and meets sanitary standards. They assume and expect that food establishments are inspected with adequate frequency. The responsibility for the food safety system in Iowa is vested in the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA) which inspects facilities with their own personnel or via contracts with local public health agencies.

Over the past few years DIA has twice reduced the inspection frequencies of certain establishments in response to budget pressures. It also has provided guidelines for assigning risk which assigns certain operations to lower risk categories resulting in inspection frequencies which are not adequate to assure food safety. Under the current system, many full service restaurants are only inspected every 24 months and other food retailers every 36 months.

Current license fees do not cover program costs statewide. The fees have only been adjusted twice in the last 35 years. However, neither of those adjustments brought the fees up to the point of covering program costs at those respective times. Since 2008, the gap between stagnant revenue and increasing costs has caused some agencies to discontinue their contracts with DIA. In 2009, DIA inspected 23 counties. Today, DIA inspects 52 of Iowa's 99 counties. The DIA has not been able to keep pace with the reacquisition of these territories and has been limited in its ability to hire additional staff due to inadequate license fees. To compensate, DIA has reduced inspection frequencies to give a semblance of compliance with their own regulations; a strategy which threatens the integrity of the entire food safety system in Iowa.

Local agencies are best equipped to implement the food safety program in Iowa. Local agencies are shown to be more efficient and timely in their review and issuing of licenses, responses to complaints and in coordinating possible food borne outbreak investigations with the local public health investigators.   However, shrinking local government resources related to commercial property tax reductions are making it more difficult for local agencies to continue subsidizing the program. If more programs are returned to the DIA, State government costs will increase and service to the food industry and consumers of Iowa will decrease.

Currently, the highest license fee for the top earning facilities is $303.75 – clearly not a barrier to food operations relative to the potential health risk. It is important to keep in mind that a

functional food safety program is more than just routine inspections. Program staff educate, develop corrective action plans, conduct follow up visits, respond to complaints and review facility plans prior to openings. Today's inspection system is vastly improved and more advanced than twenty years ago and requires a higher degree of education and training.

Policy Recommendations:

In light of the findings, above, the Johnson County Board of Health encourages the Iowa Legislature and Governor to work together to preserve Iowa's Retail Food Safety Program by taking the following actions:

- Increase food-licensing fees to fully fund food safety program activities in compliance with Iowa Code including DIA's best practice of contracting with local public health and environmental health agencies.
- Authorize DIA to administer the food licensing fees through the Iowa Administrative Code.
- Establish an automatic fee adjustment mechanism to increase fees by the percentage increase in the consumer price index.
- Create parity between license fees for retail food and food service establishments.

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