Food Service Operation Inspections

In South Carolina, the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) is the regulatory agency with the authority to inspect food service operations. The ultimate goal of a food establishment inspection is to prevent foodborne disease. Factors that can affect the occurrence of foodborne illness include:

- Types of food served.
- Preparation steps these foods require.
- Volume of the food.
- Population served.
- Previous compliance history.

Inspection is the primary tool a regulatory agency has for detecting procedures and practices that may be hazardous and taking actions to correct deficiencies. Inspections have been a part of food safety regulatory activities since the earliest days of public health. Traditionally, inspections have focused primarily on sanitation. During the late 1980s, some jurisdictions started employing the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach to refocus their inspection. Food safety is also the primary focus of a HACCP approach inspection.

Food service regulations are based on the Food and Drug Administration’s Model Food Code and backed by state law. The Food Code consists of model requirements for safeguarding public health and ensuring food is unadulterated and honestly presented when offered to the consumer. Each jurisdiction decides which part of the Food Code will be adapted as law.

Types of Inspection

Inspections determine the food establishment’s compliance with the Food Code. Food Code-based laws and ordinances provide inspectors scientifically based rules for food safety. These inspections may be categorized by purpose such as:

Pre-operational Inspection: The Food Code specifies that a pre-operational inspection shall be conducted to ensure that the establishment is built or remodeled in accordance with the approved plans and specifications.

Routine Inspection: Routine inspections should be scheduled at intervals based on risk. These inspections are full reviews of the food establishment operations and facilities and their impact on food safety. They include assessment of:

- Food employee and management health, practices and knowledge of food safety;
- Food flows, source, storage, thawing, preparation (including cooking temperatures and times) and post-preparation processes;
- Equipment and facility construction;
- Cleaning and sanitizing processes;
- Water sources and sewage disposal; and
- Vermin control.

Detailed reports are prepared at the conclusion of each inspection and presented to the person in charge. Items found not in compliance are categorized as critical or non-critical. Problem areas identified but not improved after a previous inspection are also noted.

Follow-up Inspection: The Food Code specifies that the agency shall verify that critical violations have been corrected within 10 days of the initial routine inspection that detected them.

HACCP Inspection: Establishments operating under a variance requiring a HACCP plan need to be inspected differently. HACCP plans have critical
limits that must be routinely monitored and recorded by the establishment. Monitoring and other elements of the plan must be verified by the inspector.

**Complaint Inspection:** Consumer complaints received about a food establishment are investigated. Quick response is required for those related to foodborne illnesses. Speed is essential to preserve both memories of events and possible food or environmental samples. The regulatory agency’s medical staff could be used to coordinate the collection of appropriate specimens with the complainant’s physician or hospital staff.

HACCP principles can be used to supplement traditional procedures for investigation of foodborne illness complaints to help the inspector focus on possible causes and gather better data. These help focus the investigation on foods that have been epidemiologically linked with illness. Other foods should not be completely dismissed because as more becomes known about the causes of foodborne illness, foods that may not have been historically linked to illnesses are being implicated.

**Standard Operating Procedures**

The food service operation inspector will look for adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs) based on the Food Code that help prevent food safety hazards from occurring. In general, standard operating procedures should ensure that:

- Products are purchased from approved suppliers/sources.
- The water in contact with food and food-contact surfaces, and used in the manufacture of ice is potable.
- Food-contact surfaces, including utensils, are cleaned, sanitized and maintained in good condition.
- Uncleaned and non-sanitized surfaces of equipment and utensils do not contact raw or cooked ready-to-eat food.
- Raw animal foods do not contaminate raw or cooked ready-to-eat food.
- Toilet facilities are accessible and maintained.
- Hand-washing facilities are located in food preparation, food dispensing and warewashing areas and immediately adjacent to toilet rooms, and are equipped with hand cleaning preparations and single-service towels or acceptable hand-drying devices.
- An effective pest control system is in place.
- Toxic compounds are properly labeled, stored and safely used.
- Contaminants such as condensate, lubricants, pesticides, cleaning compounds, sanitizing agents and additional toxic materials do not contact foods, food packaging materials and food-contact surfaces.
- Food, food packaging materials and food-contact surfaces do not come in contact with, and are not contaminated by, physical hazards such as broken glass from light fixtures, jewelry, etc.

**SOPs to Control Contamination of Food:**

Procedures must be in place to ensure that proper personnel health and hygienic practices are implemented including:

- Restricting or excluding workers who are ill.
- Practicing effective hand washing.
- Restricting eating, smoking and drinking in food preparation areas.
- Using hair restraints.
- Wearing clean clothing.
- Restricting the wearing of jewelry.

**SOPs to Control Microbial Growth:** These procedures ensure that all potentially hazardous food is received and stored at a refrigerated temperature of 41 °F or below.

**SOPs to Maintain Equipment:** These procedures ensure that:

- Temperature measuring devices (e.g., thermometer or temperature recording devices) are calibrated regularly.
- Cooking and hot-holding equipment (grills, ovens, steam tables, conveyor cookers, etc.) is routinely checked, calibrated if necessary and operating to ensure correct product temperature.
- Cooling equipment (refrigerators, rapid chill units, freezers, salad bars, etc.) is routinely checked, calibrated if necessary and operating to ensure correct product temperature.
- Ware-washing equipment is operating according to manufacturer’s specifications.
This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University. (New 09/99.)

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