

1999 - 2000 Ventura County Grand Jury Report

Overview of the Environmental Health Division, Community Services Section, Food Protection Program

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Background

The goal of the Food Inspection and Services Environmental Health Division, Community Services Section Food Protection Program is to ensure that the food stored and provided for human consumption from wholesale and retail food facilities is pure, safe and unadulterated. As mandated by the California Health and Safety Code, this program is responsible for inspection, education, and enforcement activities related to food production, transportation, processing, retailing, advertising, packaging, adulteration, serving and machine vending.

The Grand Jury, as part of its oversight responsibilities, accompanied inspectors during their unannounced semi-annual visits to two restaurants. The Grand Jury was able to observe the full inspection process.

Findings

The Grand Jury during the course of its protocol visit to the Community Services Section Food Protection Program established the following findings:

- F-1 The Program employs the following staff members:
 - a. 14 inspectors. (State law requires that inspectors of retail food facilities be Registered Environmental Health Specialists. This Registration is obtained by passing a State examination. In order to sit for the State examination, an inspector must meet certain educational and/or experience requirements as set forth in the State's Health and Safety Code.)
 - b. 1 food handling educator.
 - c. 1 plan check specialist (for approving plans for new and remodeled facilities handling foods).
- F-2 A 1996 workload analysis showed that the County had 2399 food establishments requiring inspection.
- F-3 Restaurants are inspected a minimum of three times a year. Violations or reported problems increase the inspection rate.

- F-4 Markets are inspected twice a year. Markets with deli service may be inspected more frequently.
- F-5 Stores selling only packaged foods (e.g., a greeting card store offering boxed candy) are inspected once every three years.
- F-6 Staff also investigate public complaints related to retail food facilities and any suspected cases of food illness.
- F-7 The above findings result in each inspector having to conduct an average of three to four inspections per day.

The Grand Jury in the course of observing inspections at restaurant facilities determined:

1. The inspection process is a vigorous one involving:
 - a. Non-refrigerated food storage and handling.
 - i. Appropriateness of containers and lids.
 - ii. Proximity to toxic non-food items.
 - iii. Access and handling scoops that minimize human contact with foods.
 - b. Refrigerated food storage.
 - i. Temperatures of frozen and refrigerated foodstuffs.
 - ii. Date codes.
 - iii. Relative placement of various food categories.
 - c. Segregation of food type handling areas.
 - d. Food preparation temperatures.
 - e. Cooked food storage temperatures.
 - f. Employee bathroom facilities, including hot water temperature measurement.
 - g. Dishwasher facilities including water temperatures.
 - h. Washcloth and rag handling and sanitation.
 - i. Garbage disposal.
 - j. Exterior doorway clearances to limit rodent ingress.
2. All violations are fully documented and discussed with the facility operator at the close of an inspection.
3. The California Health & Safety Code requires that on or before January 1, 2000, each food facility have an owner or employee who has successfully passed an approved and accredited food safety certification examination. The food safety certification examination includes the following elements of knowledge:
 - a. Foodborne illness.
 - b. The relationship between time and temperature with respect to foodborne illness.
 - c. The relationship between personal hygiene and food safety.

- d. Methods of preventing food contamination in all stages of food handling.
- e. Procedures for cleaning and sanitizing equipment and utensils.
- f. Problems and potential solutions associated with facility and equipment design, layout, and construction.
- g. Problems and potential solutions associated with temperature control, preventing cross-contamination, housekeeping, and maintenance.

The reporting of inspection results to the public is critical to the process. The Grand Jury found that:

1. At the time of the Grand Jury visit, the State Legislature was considering SB 1013, a law that would have required local health agencies to report food facility inspection information on the Internet by July 1, 2002. Hence, consideration of the letter scoring method utilized by Los Angeles County was deferred by the County pending the outcome of this legislation. The legislation was vetoed by Governor Davis in September of 1999. The

MONTH	NUMBER OF CLOSURES
Jan. 2000	6
Dec. 1999	1
Nov. 1999	13
Oct. 1999	14
Sept. 1999	12
Aug. 1999	6
July 1999	10
June 1999	17
May 1999	7
April 1999	5
March 1999	4
Feb. 1999	7
Jan. 1999	3
Dec. 1998	6
Nov. 1998	5
Oct. 1998	4
Sept. 1998	1
Aug. 1998	2
July 1998	5
June 1998	2
May 1998	5
April 1998	2
March 1998	3
Feb. 1998	1
Jan. 1998	1
Dec. 1997	4
Nov. 1997	0

Figure 1. Closures of Food Service Facilities in Ventura County as a Result of Environmental Health Division Actions

Governor stated that it was unnecessary as local health agencies could “already collaborate to create a uniform standardized reporting form and procedures and post food facility inspection information on the internet.”

2. Ventura County reports restaurant closing as the result of department noted violations on the Environmental Health Division’s web site (http://www.ventura.org/env_hlth/env.htm) in its *Food Facilities Closure Report*. This report, updated daily, gives:
 - a. The establishment name and address.
 - b. The violations (e.g., rodent infestation).
 - c. The date the facility was closed.
 - d. The date the facility was reopened (i.e., passed inspection). If the facility has not yet reopened, it is noted.
3. Figure 1 summarizes the closures detailed on the web site for the months of November 1997 through January 2000.

Conclusions

The Grand Jury concludes:

- C-1 The Environmental Health Division conducts the inspections mandated by law and its Environment Health Division Program Plan in a competent and professional manner.
- C-2 The results of its inspections are not readily available to the public who use the food service facilities inspected by the Division.

Recommendations

As a result of these conclusions, the Grand Jury makes the following recommendations:

- R-1 The Environmental Health Division develop a food service rating system which prominently displays to the public who uses a food service facility, an easily understood synopsis of the Division’s inspection of that facility.
- R-2 The Division continue its practice of reporting facility closures on its web site, and augment the site with food service facility inspection summaries that support the rating displayed in the facility.

Responses Required

The Resource Management Agency Environmental Health Division.
(R-1, R-2)