

BOARD OF HEALTH

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Position on the Administration of the Retail Food Safety Program in Iowa

Iowans have a right to wholesome and safe food in licensed food establishments. They assume and expect that food establishments are inspected with adequate frequency to protect patrons. The responsibility for the safety of the food system in Iowa is vested in the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA), which inspects facilities directly, or through contracts with local public health agencies.

DIA has twice reduced inspection frequencies in response to budget pressures. It also has adopted guidelines for assigning risk, resulting in inspection frequencies which may not be adequate to assure food safety. Under the current system, many full service restaurants are inspected only every 24 months and other food retailers every 36 months.

License fees which fund local programs contracting with DIA do not cover program costs. These fees have only been adjusted twice in the last 35 years: 1997 and 2008. Neither adjustment provided sufficient revenue to cover program costs. Since 2008, the gap between revenue and program cost has caused some agencies to discontinue their contracts with DIA. In 2009, DIA performed inspections in 23 of Iowa's 99 counties. Today, DIA covers 52 counties. DIA has not been able to keep pace with this increasing workload. To compensate, inspection frequencies were reduced, a strategy which threatens the integrity of the food safety system in Iowa.

Local agencies are best positioned to conduct the food safety program in Iowa. A locally administered program can provide more timely review and issuance of licenses, responses to complaints, food borne outbreak investigations, and inspection of establishments. In addition, local staff educate, develop corrective action plans, conduct follow up visits, respond to complaints, and review facility plans prior to opening. However, shrinking local government resources are making it more difficult for local agencies to continue subsidizing the program.

The Scott 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 and continue to contract with local public health departments.
- Establish an automatic fee adjustment consistent with the consumer price index.
- Continue to contract with local public health departments to perform inspections in order to provide the most efficient and effective administration of Iowa's food protection system.

Denise Coiner

Denise Coiner, Chair, SCBOH

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