

# NSW Vulnerable Persons Food Safety Scheme Consultative Committee

Wednesday 24 June 2015

## Summary of meeting outcomes

The NSW Vulnerable Persons Food Safety Scheme Consultative Committee held a meeting in Sydney on Wednesday, 24 June 2015. Specific issues considered by the Committee at its meeting are detailed below.

### **NSW Food Authority food safety program compliance report**

A report was presented on activities undertaken by the CIE Branch in the vulnerable persons (VP) sector during the period 1 July 2014 to 31 December 2014. This included 801 acceptable rated audits with a high compliance rate of 99%, a slight increase on the previous reporting period. Audit data analysis presented indicated the two audit items that had recorded critical defects were within process control and food safety programs, however there was a 10% reduction in critical defects issued for process control compared to the previous period. Where critical findings were recorded, follow up audits were conducted to ensure these areas had been addressed.

Enforcement action during the period included the issue of 23 improvement notices; however there were no prosecutions, and no penalty notices or warning letters issued to businesses in the VP sector. Overall there was a good result for the sector.

The Committee also received an update on the facility verification program implemented in 2014 in which there had been 26 unannounced inspections conducted so far. Out of these inspections five had recorded unacceptable results with the predominant defects identified being in the areas of process control and hygiene and sanitation. Overall inspection results for this program indicated 73% acceptable inspections, 8% marginal and 19% unacceptable. One issue identified at these unannounced inspections is the need for knowledge, skills and training to be passed down to other staff on site so that they can answer questions at these inspections when senior managers may be absent.

The Committee was also advised that the Food Authority will be running its first formal Third Party Auditor (TPA) conference in August with a whole day dedicated to high risk VP auditing. Issues such as calibration training, cook chill operations, verification results and use of computer programs will be covered with a view to standardising audits conducted by TPA auditors across the state.

### **NSW Food Safety Strategy**

The Committee received a presentation on the *NSW Food Safety Strategy for 2015-2021* which was released in February this year. It was noted that the Strategy demonstrates the government's on-going commitment to food safety in this state through the Food Authority's role as Australia's first and only through-chain food regulatory agency. It recognises the robustness of the Food Authority's food safety management systems which are a collective effort by industry, consumers, regulators and educators. The Strategy also outlines goals on which the Food Authority will focus in the next three years to achieve food safety outcomes and confidence and certainty across the supply chain.

### **Third party audit reminder process**

A paper was tabled as a reminder that licensed VP facilities operating under the TPA program need to ensure that their audits are completed at the required frequency. A process has been formalised by the Food Authority to ensure that all licensed facilities and contractors using TPA auditors receive notifications that their audit is due. Facilities that do not have their audit conducted by the scheduled date will be placed on an overdue audits register, with the following corrective action enacted by the Food Authority:

- 30 days overdue – phone call to facility
- 60 days overdue – warning letter issued
- 90 days overdue – unannounced audit by Food Authority officer at full cost.

#### **VP sector outbreaks and lessons learnt**

Members received a presentation on the outbreak of *Salmonella Bovismorbificans* which occurred across ten different aged care facilities between 21 January and 23 February 2015 and affected 33 residents resulting in two deaths. The outbreak was linked back to baked goods supplied from a central processing unit and had a significant impact in the Illawarra area. There was also significant community and press interest during the outbreak period. The presentation outlined work conducted by the incident response units within the affected aged care facilities. During the investigation officers collected 504 food samples and environmental swabs and conducted 24 separate inspections of different facilities.

It was noted that officers working on this outbreak had found that there was a general lack of records kept by the facilities on food eaten by residents, and on lot codes of foods supplied and used to prepare meals which had hampered the investigation into the source of this foodborne illness. The risk that can arise with third party suppliers was also highlighted.

The Food Authority provided a basic overview of future projects during 2015/16 to focus on manufacturers supplying VP facilities. The Food Authority will update industry members when final details are available.

The Food Authority's Chief Executive Officer, Polly Bennett, said she was extremely proud of the work conducted by the Food Authority's officers during this time and their professionalism in dealing with this incident. The collective 24/7 efforts of the organisation were to be commended. It was noted that the Food Authority's incident management protocol was used as an example in a recent FSANZ workshop on food incident preparedness.

#### **Calibration of thermometers at higher altitudes**

An information paper was presented to assist licensees understand the effect of altitude on water boiling points when calibrating thermometers. It was noted that licensees who reside in higher altitude towns in NSW need to take this into consideration when formalising their calibration procedures in their food safety plans.

#### **Service of lettuce to patients and residents in VP facilities**

A paper was tabled providing guidance on the Authority's position in relation to the service of lettuce and other ready-to-eat foods at licensed aged care facilities. The Food Authority's *Guidelines for food service to vulnerable persons* does not list lettuce as a high risk food based on a risk assessment undertaken for the Plant Products Food Safety Scheme. However some facilities had raised concerns at serving these types of foods based on previous advice from the Food Authority and a now withdrawn NSW Health Circular issued in 1999.

It was advised that the Food Authority's approach is that withdrawing these types of foods from healthy patients and long term residents could be detrimental to their overall health and wellbeing. The Food Authority will not ban high risk foods provided facilities have appropriate risk management systems in place to demonstrate to auditors that they are being managed safely.

#### **Communications update**

An update on work the Food Authority's communications team has been doing since the last meeting in relation to the vulnerable persons sector was tabled for information. This included the launch of the *NSW Food Safety Strategy 2015-2021*, and other communications provided via the web-site or directly comprising Factsheets on safe preparation of raw egg products, an article in *Foodwise* v37 on inspections and audits, guidelines and brochures on infant feeding and formula, inspection checklist for raw egg use, pregnancy brochure, food safety guidelines for the preparation of raw egg products, consumer recalls and social media promotion of *Salmonella* reduction initiatives and food safety tips.

#### **NSW Vulnerable Persons Food Safety Scheme Consultative Committee membership**

It was noted that the Food Authority is currently looking at increasing membership of the committee and current members were invited to provide input on any areas in the VP sector which they felt would benefit from committee participation.

*The date for the next meeting of the NSW Vulnerable Persons Food Safety Scheme Consultative Committee is 4 November 2015.*