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Inspectors Work Behind The Scenes To Keep Food Facilities Safe, Open



Environmental health specialist Brad Thomas inspects a local restaurant's food products for correct food temperature, one of the most common violations at Long Beach restaurants. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
Staff Writer

A team of environmental health specialists in Long Beach work each day to keep citizens of the city protected from foodborne illness and to educate food operators on proper food handling techniques.

This team of 11 food inspectors is employed through the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), a city health jurisdiction among only two others in the State of California – the others being in Pasadena and Berkeley. Other cities fall under county jurisdiction. “This provides us with a unique opportunity to do better work and better connect with the community,” says Ron Arias, director of HHS.

A citywide effort was made to develop a thorough health and food safety inspection program for Long Beach food facilities as a result of health code violations and repeated inspection failures reported on by

KCBS' Joel Grover in a 1997 series called “Behind the Kitchen Door.” Those reports resulted in Los Angeles County immediately implementing its current grading system within 30 days, according to Nelson Kerr, environmental health bureau manager. The grade represents a sliding scale; for instance, an A rating is a 90 percent or better on an inspection, Kerr says, “just like when you were in school.”

In Long Beach, however, HHS worked with city officials and the community to design its food safety inspection program during the summer of 1998.

“We were able to take a step back and engage the community, academia, the regulatory community, the council and our board of health took the reins,” Kerr says. “We were able to study the problem.” The program was officially implemented January 4, 1999.

Through that process, Kerr says, the department increased the inspection staff of environmental health specialists, standardized inspector training, increased the

frequency of inspections and developed today's comprehensive inspection summary report based on the California Food and Safety Code.

The bureau enforces state and local food safety regulations at the city's 2,206 food facilities through its food program. Food facilities include restaurants, vendors and kitchens of all kinds, food packaging facilities and prepackaged food sellers, all of which must obtain health permits from the city. There is no General Fund money spent on this program; permit fees, which are determined by the type and size of the food facility, solely support it.

The city is divided into 10 districts of about 200 facilities for each inspector to cover. The eleventh inspector typically works with the HHS plan check, which reviews plans for all food facilities, new and remodeled. These facilities must adhere to the state health and safety code.

Each inspector must have a minimum of 36 units of science courses such as microbiology or organic chemistry under his or

her belt, as well as a four-year degree, at least one year of field experience and then test for state certification. Once certified, an inspector must re-register with the state and prove 24 continuing education hours have been completed every two years.

All inspectors in Long Beach are certified in the profession, according to Arias, and the health department ensures inspectors are consistent in their inspection process by having them use a standardized form that is similar to that used by the state. Training processes are also standardized, Kerr notes. "We really pride ourselves on the professional level of our inspections staff," he says. Health inspectors are also educators in the food facilities and in the community and work to help inform employees of the food industry of rules and regulations that must be met in order to keep the public healthy.

Restaurants are typically inspected three times a year. Fast food facilities, cafeterias and other minimal food preparation entities are typically inspected twice a year. Food carts and food trucks are inspected one or two times a year. Temporary food vendors, such as those at citywide events like the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach and Long Beach Pride, are required by the HHS food program to obtain temporary health permits and endure an inspection.

According to Jackie Hampton, food program supervisor, the food program inspectors are accessible and flexible to temporary vendors. Over the past few months, she has worked with out-of-the-



Nelson Kerr, left, environmental health bureau manager with the Long Beach Health and Human Services Department, with Ron Arias, director of the department. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

area food vending trucks now scheduled to meet each Wednesday afternoon on East Anaheim Street as part of the new weekly food truck lunch event. The first event occurred on May 4. "They had five gourmet food trucks. So that looked like a successful event."

According to program regulations, the temporary vendor must get the permit at least one week before the event and meet all operation regulations as outlined by the city's temporary food facility requirements document. The city provides free training for temporary food vendors monthly, April through September.

The worst environmental health safety case in Long Beach was in 2003 when a man died after eating raw oysters from the

Gulf of Mexico that were contaminated with a bacteria. "This has been a problem for years, and the State of California said, 'We're putting our foot down and we don't want any more deaths from raw oysters,'" Hampton says. There were statewide emergency regulations banning these oysters, unless they were pasteurized or heat-treated, but unfortunately an establishment in Long Beach served them just days before the ban went into effect.

Hampton says about 48 million people a year get sick from food, and it's the HHS food program's purpose to make sure food is properly stored, prepared and served to the community. "Many of these cases are from foods prepared at home," she says, which is typically distributed on food carts,

Food Inspection System Earns A Thumbs Up

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
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The Business Journal asked several food handling establishments in Long Beach what they thought of the city's food inspection program. Here are the responses.

Luis Navarro, owner of Lola's Mexican Cuisine on 4th Street's Retro Row, says he is pleased with the food inspection program. "It feels good to know that Long Beach operates a pretty strong food safety code," he says. "I feel very comfortable to eat in Long Beach." Navarro's restaurant was inspected earlier this year.

He also noted how effective the system is and how inspectors provide a number of different tools to help food facilities stay within compliance. "Everything is strictly enforced," Navarro says. "One of the big things that helps out a lot, is the city offers various classes and they leave pamphlets on food safety courses."

Jack Skandalakis, owner of Café Bixby in Bixby Knolls, agrees. "It's a great system," he says. "I've only had good experiences." Though he understands inspectors come into an establishment unannounced, Skandalakis notes it would be best if they

didn't come during busy hours. "They have a job to do, and I have to do mine."

Renee Kim, owner of Cookies By Design, says she feels strongly of the qualifications of the three different inspectors she's had since she's owned the custom cookie gift basket business. One criticism she had was that each inspector had his or her own "style," with some items seeming "left to interpretation."

One inspector she had spent about 15 minutes in the store, whereas another was much more detailed in the inspection and spent more like an hour, according to Kim. "It doesn't seem very uniform, even though I applaud every person who has come in and inspected," she says. "They know what they're doing; I never doubt their authority."

Lazara Diaz, owner of the It's A Grind franchise location in Downtown Long Beach, said her business was last inspected at the latter part of 2010. The experience she has had with inspections has been great, Diaz says, and she thinks it works. "It's been great. If ever they find anything, they give you a warning and you have an opportunity to fix it," she notes. ". . . You never want to do anything to risk the customer's health."

Nelson Kerr, the city's environmental health bureau manager, says he finds the majority of restaurant operators in the city are excellent and easy to work with. "It's part of good business," he says. "They want to serve good, safe and wholesome food. So it's good for them and good for us." ■

trucks and other vendors. “Many of our restaurants have excellent food safety programs exceeding minimum requirements.”

Inspectors have different styles of conducting their inspections, but typically he or she immediately asks to be introduced to the manager or owner as a representative of the health department. Sometimes an inspector may sit in a restaurant or facility and watch food being prepared to observe employees’ food handling knowledge. The length of each inspection varies on the type of establishment, according to Hampton. For example, a full restaurant inspection would take more time than it would to inspect a fast food chain restaurant, which is more likely to have a streamlined process that expedites the inspection. Hampton estimated inspections should take anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours.

The program provides for about 250 inspections each month, and inspections are prioritized by risk on a calendar or occur as a result of consumer complaint. “We receive about 30 complaints a month, mostly dealing with sanitation and trash issues,” Hampton notes. The program is always open to consumer comment and complaints about food safety at city establishments.

The inspection summary report, standardized throughout the city, is completed after inspectors check 53 different items, with options for grading each item in compliance (In), not observed (N/O), not applicable (N/A), not in compliance (OUT), corrected on-site (COS) and major violation (MAJ). Some items inspectors look for are a demonstration of food safety knowledge, employee health and hygiene, time

and temperature relationships, food display and storage, waste disposal and compliance within other categories. “No matter what kind of facility we [inspect], it’s the same kind of regulations that we look at throughout,” Hampton says.

Once the inspector completes the report, it is then posted within the first five feet of the facility entrance in a window or area visible to customers. The report shows whether or not correction action was needed and taken, and, if a correction was made, in what area the issue was discovered. If an establishment is charged with a violation, the owner has the opportunity to instantly correct the problem if possible. The violation that’s written up the most often is improper food temperature. Food that has been stored at improper temperatures may need to be discarded.

If the violation is serious, the establishment has a certain amount of time before the problem must be corrected. Upon correction or repair, an inspector is sent out immediately to help re-open the facility. Violations that result in immediate shut-down include: vermin, including cockroaches and rodents; non-working refrigerator; no electricity; no water or hot water; plumbing problems and the like. Inspectors shut down about 80 facilities a year, according to Hampton, many of which work to effectively and safely re-open to the public.

New Food Handling Regulations Effective In July

As part of each inspection, the inspector must verify that at least one person at each facility is certified in food safety. More strict guidelines on proper and safe food

handling practices are set to come into effect this summer.

SB 602, the new California Food Handler Card law, requires workers to have a California Food Handler Card by July 1 to ensure restaurant employees receive a reasonable amount of training in food safety practices. “The two most common ways people become sick from food are improper food temperatures or employee health and hygiene issues,” Hampton says. “So food safety training is really critical in protecting the food.”

To get a food handler card, one must pass a food handler test taken online or in a designated classroom with a minimum 70 percent score. Once a card is issued, its valid throughout most of the state for three years. Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties are exempt from the law because they already have food handler card programs. Each food establishment must have records that indicate each employee received the required handler card, which must be shown to local law enforcement upon request.

According to Hampton, it currently takes an eight-hour class at a cost of about \$125 to become a certified food manager. That certification is good for five years. This new handler card program is a two-and-a-half-hour course and is as inexpensive as \$25, she says. Managers and shift leaders of restaurants may register as an instructor with the National Restaurant Association’s ServSafe California Food Handler Program to administer the training and test to employees. For more information, visit servsafe.com/foodhandler. ■