

State Health Agencies & Food Safety: Responsibilities, Challenges and Opportunities

State Health Agency Capacity to Protect the Public

State Health Agencies play a critical role in food safety as they are responsible for regulatory, laboratory, epidemiological response, and coordination activities. Yet, there is no single sustainable source of funding for state health agencies' food safety activities. Federal food safety funding at state and local levels has not kept up with rapid changes in the food supply and the growing complexity of food safety problems. Further, the economic crisis has significantly affected state health agency capacity as states are forced to cut programs, such as food safety inspections, lab testing capacity and epidemiological investigations.

States face significant challenges in maintaining capacity to protect the public. The State Public Health Workforce is in crisis, with 20% of the average state health agency's workforce eligible to retire within three years. Hiring freezes and recent budget cuts make it even harder to recruit and retain personnel. As of December 2008, two states have already lost 15% of their workforce through attrition; one of these expects to lose another 15% in FY09. At least 29% of states expect to lose staff through layoffs or attrition in FY09.

Expanding federal grant programs will enhance state capacity to prevent and respond to foodborne illness.

Inspection and Enforcement Activities

- The majority of inspection and enforcement activities at the state and local level are funded by state general funds or licensing fees. Further support from FDA is needed for states to build capacity and enhance capability to inspect facilities, enforce recalls, provide consumer protection, and aid in traceback efforts.
- FDA provides a minimal level of funding to state programs to conduct inspections by contract and supports technical assistance and training through cooperative agreements in the Retail Food Protection Program, the Shellfish Sanitation Program and the Milk Safety Program. In addition, the FDA provides \$5,000 per state to support State Food Safety Taskforces which aim to improve state-level coordination of food safety activities.
- In 2008, The FDA awarded six states (CA, FL, MA, MI, MN, and NC) funds to develop and sustain food protection rapid response teams (RTT). FDA has awarded \$500,000 per year for three years to the six states. These teams will integrate regulatory, surveillance, and response functions and will strengthen state food safety capacity.

Surveillance and Outbreak Response Programs

- PulseNet: PulseNet is a laboratory surveillance tool that allows states to rapidly identify large-scale foodborne illness outbreaks. However, PulseNet funding is not sufficient. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) PulseNet program currently receives less than \$5 Million in the Epidemiological and Laboratory Capacity Cooperative Agreement Program which goes to states to conduct disease surveillance. CDC and states need further support to enhance laboratory capacity to rapidly collect, analyze and act on samples collected through PulseNet.
- FoodNet: Only ten sites (CA, CO, CT, GA, MD, MN, NM, NY, OR, and TN) are currently funded to conduct active surveillance of foodborne pathogens. Further expansion of this effective CDC program will greatly enhance the nation's ability to quickly identify and respond to foodborne disease threats.

ASTHO proposes that the new Administration:

- Establish and provide dedicated funding for state-based public health food safety activities. In the budget, the President should establish a new grant scheme to provide flexible, sustainable funding to State Health Agencies to support their food inspection, enforcement and outbreak response programs, including the expansion of existing programs. An initial annual funding level of \$100 million, growing in \$50 million increments over five years to \$350 million, would make a significant contribution to improving the national food safety system.
- Increase CDC's PulseNet funding to at least \$10 Million.
- Expand the FDA Rapid Response Team program to fund all states.
- Establish protocols and develop surge capacity to support state and local health agencies during large recalls and outbreaks that may cross jurisdictions, require specialized expertise, or additional resources.
- Authorize funding to create a public health loan repayment program for new graduates who pursue governmental public health careers and enhance state efforts on recruitment and retention of public health professionals.

National Leadership on Food Safety

Food safety responsibilities are fragmented across federal, state, and local agencies as well as private industry and lack sufficient coordination. The integration of all food safety activities is needed to create a 21st century food safety system.

ASTHO proposes that the new Administration:

- Establish food safety as a national priority, as recommended by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO).
- Ensure that any reorganization of federal agencies conducting food safety activities is strongly supported by evidence that clearly demonstrates improvement in efficiency and public health protection.
- Create a national leadership council or broad stakeholder group to drive this nation's food safety system into the 21st Century. A model similar to the National Food Safety System (NFSS), established in the late-1990s and disbanded in 2002, provides a framework that would institute national leadership and coordination across food safety activities. This body will be charged to:

Provide national leadership to coordinate all food safety activities;

Develop a national strategy for modernizing food safety;

Standardize food safety practices and information sharing across the nation;

Build a baseline understanding of capacity to prevent, identify and respond to foodborne illness;

Integrate with existing initiatives such as the FDA Food Protection Plan and its subsequent activities; and

Support the Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response (CIFOR) activities.

- Make certain that all federal governmental entities involved in food safety are led by individuals who strongly understand the principles of public health and public health science.
- Urge Congress to act on the GAO's recommendation to enact comprehensive, uniform and risk-based food safety legislation. All federal agencies should employ rigorous, scientific risk-based approaches to food safety including imported foods.
- Increase funding for Federal agencies undertaking food safety operations and ensure that resources are utilized in a scientific, risk-based manner that optimizes public health protection.

- Establish standardized protocols and incentives for the collection, sharing and integration of data across agencies in the food safety system.