

12-10-10 Some Just Reminders and Just A Few Jerks

It's an extra busy time for boards of health, (or their staff, actually), right now because most public health departments issue numerous permits on an annual calendar basis. That means it is time to send out letters reminding people it is time to renew their application. The bulk of these letters are for people who want to keep their permitting in place at all times, such as the food establishments. Other permits are renewed as they are needed, such as permitting someone to be a septic system installer. They usually wait until they have a job and then apply in that town.

Over the years, those letters and applications have changed. We encourage people to give us more contact information, especially emails. The goal is to be able to process those applications electronically. But, I understand that everyone is not a fan of electronic, mobile or digital. There's something to be said about the tangible experience of holding a piece of paper in hand, keeping it within sight at the workplace and bringing it in person.

Delivering an application in person allows the applicant to ask questions without a phone call. A food establishment application has a lot of questions. The front is mostly looking for contact information, corporation information, if it applies and hours of operation. The back side of the application has an extensive checklist as to the type of food prepared and sold. It is intimidating to many. It is small print and, being a government document, it, of course, has to contain lingo and acronyms. At least the acronyms are defined in a little outlined box right above the checklist but many people don't realize it is there and if they are new to the business or if the owner sends in an uninformed staff member, then we end up sitting down and going over it. Conversing with applicants, with callers, with complainers, with the "just wondering"-ers, convinces me the chat is well worth the time.

The conversation surrounding food establishment applications usually centers around one or more several routine topics. The most frequent topic is those acronyms. Are they preparing PHF's for hot holding? PHF's for cold holding? A PHF is a Potentially Hazardous Food. A cookie is not a PHF. The meatballs kept in the crock-pot and the chicken salad kept in the fridge are PHF's. When the checklist is finished, it gives me, at a glance, as sense of the degree to which the owner and food handlers need to be aware of food safety and the few or the many steps along the way from receiving to serving requiring knowledge and care. It is definitely a worthwhile checklist and conversation.

Along with the application, there are reminders included in a cover letter. Owners are reminded that grease tanks need to be cleaned or monitored at least four times a year. Grease will quickly clog a leaching area and if the grease tank were to overflow, just believe me on this, nothing smells worse. So, for the environment, for the success of the business and to prevent a costly repair of a septic system, cleaning the grease tank is well worth it. Besides, it is the law of our Department of Environmental Protection. The States and Feds make the laws; the locals

enforce them, and, so, understanding the purpose is important at the local level. We are more likely to see compliance if we are partners wanting the same outcomes of success and safety.

Each year the food establishments are reminded to speak to their employees, especially new hires, about the employee illness reporting policies. Employees read about what illnesses have to be reported and they sign a statement saying so. That signature not only “covers” the employer but the acts of talking, reading and signing reinforce the importance of not handling food when ill. It brings home the message that even when food is prepared and stored properly, it can become the vehicle, the method of delivery of contamination, by bringing the bacterium and viruses into the mouths and stomachs of unsuspecting consumers when they eat the foods prepared and contaminated by sick food handlers. That should not happen to any of us but it happens easily because those contaminating “bugs” are microscopic and invisible to the eyes.

Illness reporting policies also remind us of why we do not allow Bare-Hand-Contact with Ready-To-Eat-Foods. Just in case a food handler was unaware of an illness or that hands have not been washed sufficiently, a barrier is to be used for foods that are ready to eat. Preparing the greens and vegetables for a salad require gloves. Donuts might be handled with deli papers. Small tongs should be used by the bartender for that lemon or lime slice. Yup. Really. That drink is food, too; and so isn't ice.

This year will have a new request in the package. It is an offer, actually. I will offer to inspect once by appointment. There should not be any excuses of “We just ran out of gloves.” or “I was just going to set up the sanitizing solution.” I'll ask them to call in to the office during January or February and make an appointment with Peggy for one inspection to happen between January and May. Previously, food establishment inspections have always been unannounced. Therefore, despite my good intentions of getting there soon, these particular inspections tend to get bumped along when the calls come in for site inspections, investigations, complaints, emergencies or unusual and unforeseen time consuming projects such as reviewing engineering proposals for monitoring the landfill or someone just acts like a jerk for months on end.

I am thankful there are more considerate people than there are jerks in this world, or at least in my world. But, hey, now I can even thank the jerks for giving me a new idea to help me stay on track with other aspects of my job. The inconsiderate type might have to wait a bit for that appointment because the calendar is pretty full with the considerate and preventive and pro-active type of appointment. Here's hoping!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA and is ready to listen. You can reach her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us