

## 12-12-08 Renewing Permits: Who's Been Naughty or Nice?

All across the country, boards of health are busy renewing permits falling under their jurisdiction. I think that's pretty cool; that we are all engaged in the same work, striving toward the same goal: inspecting, providing oversight of safety measures and assuring public health.

No matter what time of year it is, I think of my mother when I think about renewing permits, which always happens right around Christmas. My mother would call through the house for me and I would answer, "I'm coming!" even though I didn't take a step. Having called five children before me and several after, hearing the same response from all of us, she responded with patient impatience, "And so is Christmas!"

And so it is with renewing permits. We know it's coming. It requires patience but we feel impatient waiting for results. And that's just the way it is.

From Thanksgiving to Christmas, boards of health staff send and receive renewal applications for permit renewals. There are many other types of permits issued by local boards of health, such as soil evaluators, Title V inspectors and sewage haulers and trash haulers. (Don't we have fun topics and terminology?) Some of those people or businesses wait until they have some work in that town before renewing. However, some activities remain in good times and in bad. Food goes in and waste goes out. So, it is the local food establishments, sewage and trash haulers comprising the majority of the renewal applications at the end of the year.

Processing those applications results in labor-intensive flurries of activity at the end of the year. Whether those activities appear to be a well rehearsed routine or organized chaos depends on the staff and their support. I am fortunate enough to have the best assistant in the world, but we see a wide range of capabilities and means of production in boards of health. Some offices are part time with no administrative help at all. I cannot imagine even attempting to work effectively under such circumstances. There is so much paper work, calls to make, letters to write and topics to research, in addition to the inspections, perc tests, complaint investigations and emergencies. Other public health departments are large enough to have inspectors and staff for each category: environmental, housing, food, soil evaluation, epidemiology and public health nurses and physicians, as the most common categories.

In my almost nine rapidly overturning years as a health agent, I have seen so many changes and improvements in administrative efficacy. I can clearly recall the day I first issued permits via a mail merge instead of individually printed or even hand written ones. I remember asking why housing inspections were written on green paper, only to be told, "I don't know why. It's just always been done that way."

In time, with the help of such organizations as the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards and Massachusetts Department of Public Health, I would learn that records had to be kept but the paper did not, in fact, have to be green! I also learned that the renewal time is a time to remind and time to require. The responsibility of permitting (or not) a person or company for an activity is an important one and it is a time of opportunity for all parties involved. In other words, who's been naughty or nice? I'm making a list and I'm checking it twice.

That is literally the truth. The food establishments are supposed to be inspected at least twice per year. There are follow up inspections, as needed. I have a list of recently

observed problems needing correction. Has that faucet handle been repaired? Has that “sweeper” on the bottom of the door been replaced?

I have lists for me, too. What message needs reinforcing? How can I improve the public’s understanding of the proper use of gloves? Have I told the new and reminded the existing food establishments about employee illness reporting?

Every once in a while, my list includes the question of whether or not a permit should be renewed. Have I done all I could to educate and assist? Have I kept my board abreast of the situation? Has the owner/individual been forewarned of the potential for a permit being revoked or not renewed? And have I given ample opportunity for the situation to be corrected?

It is all a labor of love, this teaching and learning, cooperating and communicating business performed by boards of health. May this labor of love continue in good times and in bad.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the town of Halifax, MA. She wants to hear your thoughts on improving and assuring public health. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*