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Hawaii State Department of Health Completes More than 10,000 Inspections of Food Service Establishments

HONOLULU -- Consumers can have greater peace of mind this holiday season. The Hawaii State Department of Health (DOH) Sanitation Branch, which launched inspections of food establishments with a color-coded placard system in July 2014, recently completed inspections of virtually all of Hawaii's more than 10,000 food establishments statewide to ensure they are in compliance with the rules of the state's food safety code.

This covered about 6,000 such establishments on Oahu, 1,800 on Hawaii Island, 1,700 in Maui County, and 690 on Kauai. The food code requires inspections of restaurants, hotels, caterers, food warehouses, markets, convenience stores, lunch wagons, push carts, and institutional kitchens for healthcare facilities, preschools, elementary schools, adult and child day care centers, and prisons.

A total of 45 Hawaii Department of Health inspectors completed the inspections. On Oahu, there are currently 30 Hawaii Department of Health inspectors in the field; seven on Hawaii Island; four for Maui County; and three on Kauai.

“Consumers now look for the green placards posted as validation that their favorite eating spots are protected from foodborne illnesses and other health hazards,” said Peter Oshiro, who oversees the Hawaii Department of Health’s inspection program. “The good news is that the majority of Hawaii’s establishments are in compliance with the state’s food safety code.”

Green placards are issued for those establishments with no more than one critical violation that must be corrected at the time of inspection; yellow cards are issued to those with two or more critical violations; and red placards are used for those food establishments that need to be immediately closed because they pose an imminent health hazard to the community.

Of all the establishments that were inspected since the program began, the Hawaii Department of Health has issued only three red placards with monetary fines – all on Oahu – that required the suspension of their permit and were ordered to temporarily close their operations.

The Department of Health issued 2,105 yellow placards or conditional passes that require the establishments to address violations. “We’ve found that those establishments that received yellow placards are motivated to address any shortcomings and change their practices to come into compliance,” Oshiro said. “The average time for corrections is two to three days.”

“There has been a voluntary compliance rate of over 99.8% for those food facilities that were issued a yellow placard. This confirms that the placarding program has been a huge success in terms of influencing rapid and voluntary correction of food safety violations,” Oshiro said.

“The Department of Health has long recognized that litigating solutions through permit suspensions and the levying of fines is counter-productive and time consuming when

compared with voluntary compliance, which is truly a win-win-win outcome for the regulatory agency, the food facilities, and most importantly public health, by reducing the public's exposure to food illness risk factors," Oshiro added.

Oshiro said there may be some mobile food service establishments or others that have not yet been inspected. If the public does not see a placard at an eatery, they are encouraged to inform the Hawaii Department of Health so that an inspection can be scheduled at that site. The public can notify the Department of Health about these sites at 586-8000.

There is more good news: The online portal that will allow the public to access the inspection results is targeted to be operational in the first quarter of 2016. The system, which also allows food establishments to apply and pay for permits, is also scheduled to be ready in the new year. These functions are now being tested before they are officially launched in 2016, Oshiro said.

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