

REGS CORNER

Patco 
FOOD SAFETY

A learning tool to increase our knowledge of Food Safety best practices, as seen through the eyes of actual Health Department Food Safety Inspectors.

On November 24, 2016, Thanksgiving Day, somewhere between 800 and 1,100 customers ordered a holiday meal at the Golden Ponds Restaurant in the Rochester, NY, area. The next day, the Monroe County Health Department ordered the restaurant closed after 260 patrons became ill with nearly identical symptoms. The restaurant had been inspected by the Health Department on November 1st, November 16th and again on the 25th when it was ordered closed.

This foodborne illness outbreak was attributed to gravy that was held on the buffet at a temperature that was not hot enough. The bacterium *Clostridium perfringens* was isolated from the gravy and stool samples of the customers.

Below are several of the more serious violations found by the Health Department during their inspections. They indicate serious cleanliness shortcomings and are examples of ongoing poor food handling.

STANDARD: Utensils and equipment properly stored, dried, and handled.

VIOLATION: Knives stored as clean in the knife rack were heavily soiled.

EXPLANATION: When soiled knives are placed into the knife rack, they are made available for continued use. This will cause contamination of the foods to be cut. It also causes the contamination of the knife rack, especially on the inside where the soils build up and are not easily seen. Clean knives that may be placed in the rack are then contaminated. Knife racks should be used only for cleaned and sanitized utensils. Soiled knives should be placed in a designated area until removed to the warewashing area for cleaning and sanitizing.

STANDARD: Food contact surfaces clean and sanitized.

VIOLATION: Interior surfaces of ice machine bin observed with mold and slime inside.

EXPLANATION: Ice is considered a food because it is consumed in beverages, and is often added to certain foods to facilitate the cooling process. The inside of the ice machine bin is a food contact surface, and must be kept in a clean and sanitized condition so that the ice does not become contaminated. The owner should contact a professional to do an initial cleaning of the entire ice machine, including internal parts so that any mold or slime in those areas can be removed. He should also designate a staff member to clean and sanitize the inside of the ice bin weekly.

STANDARD: Insects, rodents, and animals not present.

VIOLATION: Numerous mouse droppings observed in the kitchen.

EXPLANATION: Mice and other pests are capable of transmitting diseases to humans through contamination of food and food contact surfaces. There was an excessive amount of food debris observed on the floors throughout the facility that is an attractant to rodents and insects. Openings in exterior walls of the facility provide an easy access to the interior for these pests. A licensed professional pest management company should be contacted to eliminate the current infestation, and to provide guidance for preventing any future infestations. Droppings throughout the restaurant should be removed, and the floors thoroughly cleaned.

STANDARD: Proper hot holding temperature.

VIOLATION: Potentially hazardous foods not kept at a minimum of 140°F. during hot holding.

EXPLANATION: This Health Department goes above the FDA Food Code requirement for hot holding temperatures of 135°F. or above. However, the food product in question, gravy, was well below the minimum requirement. The gravy was being held on a buffet line. There is no detail available in the Health Dept. inspection reports to indicate whether or not the gravy had been reheated to 165°F. on the range or other cooking equipment before being placed on the hot holding unit. Buffet line equipment is typically not designed to heat foods, but only to hold them at the correct temperature.

STANDARD: Thermometer provided and accurate.

VIOLATION: Accurate thermometers not available or used to evaluate potentially hazardous food temperatures during cooking, cooling, reheating and holding.

EXPLANATION: The only way to determine whether or not food has been cooked, cooled, reheated, or held at the correct temperature is to use a thermometer. In a full-service restaurant, there should be several thermometers available for use. Thermometers for measuring food temperatures must be accurate to +/-2°F. They must be sanitized between uses, and stored in a clean and sanitary manner. Foods should be stirred before taking a temperature reading so that the heat is evenly distributed throughout the product. This is especially true for large containers of food, such as gravy. The temperature should have been taken to ensure that it had been reheated correctly and periodically while it was being held on the buffet line.

STANDARD: Pasteurized dairy products and eggs used.

VIOLATION: Unpasteurized milk and milk products used.

EXPLANATION: The FDA Food Code states in Section 3-202.14: "Fluid and dry milk and milk products shall be obtained pasteurized. Fluid milk and milk products are especially good growth media for many types of bacteria and must be pasteurized." A full-scale restaurant is likely to serve high-risk customers who are more susceptible to becoming sick from consuming unpasteurized milk. Raw milk as an ingredient in a recipe will not become hot enough in the cooking process to achieve pasteurization, which is needed to kill harmful bacteria that may be in the milk.

Other violations cited were improper glove usage; cooling and reheating procedures; inadequate lighting and ventilation; light fixtures not shielded; dirty ventilation hoods, ductwork, filters, and exhaust fans; equipment non-food contact surfaces not clean; floors/walls/ceilings not properly constructed or is disrepair; broken or substandard kitchen equipment; mold on the beverage dispensing gun holder; refrigeration door gaskets that did not allow the doors to close tightly; heavy deposits of food spills and mold on walk-in refrigerator floor. The restaurant was re-inspected; officials note a "huge turnaround" and the facility was given permission to reopen on December 27th.

Ask the Expert: For any Food Safety or Sanitation questions or concerns, contact Linda Wilt via email - LWilt@bhcinc.com

Sources: Monroe County NY Health Dept., FoodSafetyNews.com, FoodPoisoningJournal.com