

around the Agency

By Matthew D. Baun

Achieving Our Public Health Mission

In nearly every speech given by the USDA's Under Secretary for Food Safety and the Food Safety and Inspection Service's Administrator, you will hear that the mission of FSIS is to protect public health through food safety and security. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that each of the agency's 10,000-plus employees play a role in this effort. Here are three examples of how they do just that.

Under the Cover of Darkness

March 2006—Even by a farmer's watch, these were odd hours — definitely not working hours. Most farms in rural communities cease activity around dusk and are most certainly quiet between eleven at night and three in the morning. But on one farm in Pennsylvania, the shop inside the barn was just getting its day's business underway.

Outside, two FSIS investigators had been keeping watch for several consecutive nights from their vehicle, following up on a tip. It was late at night, but as any investigator from the Compliance Investigations Division (CID) in FSIS' Office of Program Evaluation, Enforcement and Review knows, these hours just go with the territory. Their job, like those of all FSIS employees, is to protect public health through food safety and security.

"CID investigators follow up on all tips and complaints they receive about FSIS-regulated product," said **Joseph Priore**, a supervisory CID Investigator in Philadelphia. "The bottom line is that our investigators are driven to protect public health and they go to great lengths to remove harmful and potentially harmful products from commerce in order to protect consumers."

CID investigators receive many complaints about violations of federal food safety laws and regulations. Many of these tips do not pan out, but this one did. The two FSIS investigators watching the barn witnessed the same routine for several nights. They watched a truck arrive at the premises, unload its contents — pig carcasses in this case — and then drive away.

Meanwhile, inside the barn, next to the tractor, cans of oil and bales of hay, the carcasses were being processed into pork products destined for the ethnic markets in Philadelphia and New York City.

These products, intended for human consumption, were being processed without USDA inspection in unsanitary conditions. Each of these factors is a violation of federal law.

Working with USDA's Office of Inspector General, the FSIS investigators gained enough evidence and established clear patterns of the violators' behavior. They then donned bullet-proof vests and prepared to move into the building. While investigators



themselves do not carry firearms, they are accompanied by Federal law enforcement officers who do.

When the USDA team made its move, the man in the barn looked surprised. "Wow, you guys are working late!" he said.

"No, sir," said one compliance investigator. "You are working late. We are just doing our jobs."

USDA made the "bust" without incident, the violator was forced to shut down his illegal operation, and FSIS kept the unsafe products out of the food supply.

FSIS/OPEER CID Philadelphia Investigators from left to right are Joseph Schein, Michael Ronczka, Roslyn Brogdon, Michael Altimari, Paul Flanagan, Scott Warren, and Joseph Priore. (FSIS photo by Lauren Behar)



the end, only one consumer reported minor gastric problems.

“CCMS led to the timely identification of adulterated product,” said **Kis Robertson**, D.V.M., an epidemiologist with HHSD. “Through joint efforts of OPHS and FSIS’ Office of Field Operations, the hazardous product was removed from commerce and more illnesses were likely averted.”

HHSD casts its public health nets far and wide, according to Division Director **Elisabeth Hagen**, M.D. The staff is constantly and proactively engaged in human illness investigations that might be linked to products that FSIS regulates.

“Our team works with state and local public health officials throughout the country,” said Hagen. “We routinely talk to state and local partners to see if there are human illness cases that might be linked to FSIS-regulated products. And, HHSD staff members identify possible links to human illness through surveillance of FSIS routine sampling data and public health list serves.”

Communication also plays a role in these situations. FSIS’ Office of Public Affairs, Education and Outreach issues news releases to alert the media and consumers about the product. FSIS also intensifies its communication with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention when there is a link between human illness and an FSIS-regulated product. “The goal for FSIS and our public health partners is to put the puzzle pieces together to solve the mystery of how persons became ill,”

Putting the Pieces Together

February 2005—Three different complaints, three separate days.

“THE MEAT AND THE PACKAGING SMELLED LIKE GASOLINE.”

“TURKEY WITH UNUSUAL SMELL — LIKE FUEL.”

“GROUND BEEF SMELLED STRONGLY OF DIESEL FUEL.”

FSIS documented these entries in a computer-based surveillance system that tracks consumer complaints — the Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS). Epidemiologists in the Human Health Sciences Division (HHSD) of FSIS’ Office of Public Health Science (OPHS) constantly monitor the entries.

The tainted product was traced back to a turkey plant whose equipment leaked hydraulic fluid. In

Continued on page 6 ...

... Continued from page 5

said **Kristin Holt**, D.V.M., M.P.H., FSIS' liaison to the CDC in Atlanta. "This is critical to ensure that we can take immediate and appropriate actions to protect public health."

A Direct Line of Communication

November 2003—A man contacted the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at FSIS because he wanted to prepare a full Thanksgiving dinner for his wife who had terminal cancer and was confined to a hospital bed. He did not know how to cook, so he called the Hotline. **CiCi Williamson**, a food safety specialist on the Hotline, walked him through the steps to safely cook the holiday meal.

More than 2 million calls have come to the Hotline since its inception in 1985. In any given month, the Hotline receives 4,500 to 7,500 calls from the public, according to Hotline Manager Diane Van. During the Hotline's busiest season, around the Thanksgiving holiday, calls increase to about 1,000 per day.

The call Williamson took is just one example of how the Hotline's food safety experts help individual

consumers prevent foodborne illness. During this kind of one-on-one interaction, consumers receive information that empowers them to keep themselves and their families safe. It is impossible to put numbers on prevention but through their work and dedication, the Hotline staff has saved countless citizens from bouts of foodborne illness.

Williamson also informed the man that, because of his wife's condition, she was at a higher risk for foodborne illness and that he needed to be especially careful when preparing meals for her. The hospital granted his wife leave for one day so she could join him in their home for Thanksgiving.


The man later wrote the Hotline about how much he appreciated their help. "His wife had since died of cancer, but he wrote that he had that wonderful Thanksgiving dinner with her at home to remember," said Williamson.

To expand the Hotline's service to individual consumers and provide service to the increasing numbers of consumers using the Internet, the Hotline added a Web-based automated response system called "Ask Karen" to its resources. This feature is accessible on the agency's Web site at AskKaren.gov. Users



USDA Hotline food safety experts, like CiCi Williamson, answer questions that empower callers to keep themselves and their families safe from foodborne illness. (FSIS photo by Matthew Baun)

simply follow the easy-to-use prompts to ask their questions.

"Providing answers to consumers' specific questions through Ask Karen and through the personalized service of the Hotline's food safety experts, FSIS helps consumers protect their health in very specific ways, around the clock," said Van. 

Got Food Safety Questions?



Visit "Ask Karen" at AskKaren.gov to Ask a Food Safety Question.

Call the **USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline: 1-888-MPHOTLINE**
(1-888-674-6854)

