



USDA Secretary Mike Johanns visits the FSIS Food Safety Education exhibit booth at the 2006 Food Safety Education Conference in Denver, attended by Susan Conley, Director of Food Safety Education at FSIS, and Barbara O'Brien, Deputy Director.

Food Safety Conference Focuses on Those Most "AT-RISK"

By Matthew D. Baun

The 2006 Food Safety Education Conference in Denver this past fall proved to be a gathering post for ideas, strategies and information on improving the level of food safety in the United States. Titled *Reaching At-Risk Audiences and Today's Other Food Safety Challenges*, the conference sparked an ongoing dialogue among the more than 600 food safety and health professionals in attendance.

The primary mission of the conference was having attendees explore the various ways of reaching those most "at risk" for foodborne illness with critical food safety messages. The "at-risk" demographic is a sizable one. Nearly one in five Americans fall into this category and it includes young children, older adults, pregnant women and those with a weakened immune system — people with diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS and transplant recipients.

"We have a common goal with the public health and medical communities to save lives, and food safety is definitely an integral part of that," said Bryce Quick, Deputy Administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service and a speaker at the conference. "It was exciting to see how public health professionals, the medical community, the food industry, food safety educators and consumers came together at this conference."

The behind-the-scenes efforts provided attendees access to a comprehensive program of more than 80 exhibits and posters, more than 30 breakout sessions and numerous keynote speeches by top USDA and public health officials in the United States.

Attendees left these sessions with a better understanding of how to reach "at-risk" audiences while receiving the latest information on behavioral and attitudinal research, effective social marketing strategies and innovative approaches to reaching the "at-risk" and underserved populations. Attendees also learned about successful programs being used to train and educate caregivers such as foodservice workers, and even those who prepare meals in their own homes.

Conference attendees also received a strong dose of encouragement from leading USDA and public health officials who described their valuable contributions to improving public health while suggesting areas where public health and food safety issues can be improved.

Adm. John O. Agwunobi, M.D., M.B.A., M.P.H., Assistant Secretary for Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, referred to conference attendees, many of whom came from state and local health agencies, as his "army" in the national fight against public health threats, including foodborne illness.

A pediatrician, Agwunobi is the nation's highest ranking public health officer. He encouraged conference



Under Secretary Dr. Richard A. Raymond, USDA Office of Food Safety, presents the FSIS Bauman Award to R. Bruce Tompkin for his continued dedication to food safety.

Photos courtesy of the 2006 Food Safety Education Conference

attendees to network and communicate with each other so their ideas and successes would be known to other public health professionals.

Agwunobi also issued a challenge to the conference attendees by asking them to take the message to underserved populations in the United States.

“We still don’t reach into racial and ethnic communities the way we do the majority,” said Agwunobi. “There are still gaps in taking that high step of food safety into these underserved communities around the nation.”

Attendees also heard from another national figure on the public health scene, Georges C. Benjamin, M.D., Executive Director of the American Public Health Association.


Benjamin said public health officials should take pride in the work they do even though they never get to see the faces of the people they help through their work and dedication.

Benjamin encouraged conference attendees to become better communicators in order to more effectively engage the public on critical health issues. He encouraged public health professionals to seek out opportunities in order to raise awareness.

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Adm. John O. Agwunobi, M.D.
Assistant Secretary for Health
U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services

“Too often in the public health community we talk to ourselves, listen to ourselves, and answer our own questions,” said Benjamin. “We fail to engage critical stakeholders like the general public, policy makers, and the business community. It is time to change for the sake of the people we serve.” 

EQUIPPING THE AT-RISK

Targeted Materials for the Immune-Compromised

By Tanja K. Allen

“Food Safety for the At-Risk: A Brochure Series for the Immune-Compromised,” a new series of publications, is targeted to persons most susceptible to foodborne illness. These at-risk groups include the very young, pregnant women, older adults and those with a weakened immune system who may experience lengthier illness, hospitalization or even death should they contract a foodborne illness.

The series comprises five brochures that provide a comprehensive, yet consumer-friendly overview of safe food-handling principles. They include:

- ♥ *Food Safety for Transplant Recipients,*
- ♥ *Food Safety for Older Adults,*



- ♥ *Food Safety for People with Diabetes,*
- ♥ *Food Safety for People with Cancer,* and
- ♥ *Food Safety for People with HIV/AIDS.*

The brochures will help to promote safe food-handling behaviors among the select at-risk groups and their caregivers. FSIS expects that the medical community will also find the information useful in educating their patients about food safety.

“Sharing food safety information with all Americans — particularly at-risk groups — and encouraging positive behavior modification

during food preparation and consumption is critical in reducing their exposure to pathogens known to cause foodborne illness,” said Cmdr. Janice Adams-King, a U.S. Public Health Service, Commissioned Corps Officer and a member of FSIS’ Food Safety Education Staff.

FSIS will promote the use of the brochure series among the respective at-risk groups, their caregivers, the medical community and food safety educators. They will be available at national, state and local conferences and from FSIS on the Web at www.fsis.usda.gov, by e-mailing fsis.outreach@usda.gov or by contacting the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline. 