

HHRESOURCE MANAGEMENT AGENCY

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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Madera County Food Safety Awareness and Protection Enhancement Program

During the past few years, the Madera County Environmental Health Department (MCEHD) has overcome many obstacles and setbacks that were related to: reorganization from being an independent department to being part of a larger Resource Management Agency; lack of staffing resources and a sudden loss of more experienced and mid-management personnel; and public misunderstanding of what Environmental Health does. It was at this time; the Department stepped back and took a really hard look at our situation. All of our environmental health programs were struggling and, in some cases, they were almost non-existent. The Department was trying to establish a cohesive and coordinated working relationship with other RMA departments, yet at the same time trying to maintain our own identity and role in the County. Doing more with less was not an option. Even as staff kept eating the elephant one bite at a time, everyone else (including Board members) just kept seeing the elephant. Morale was faltering. This was not a time of transition, it was time to re-build, even re-invent the Department. At the very least, MCEHD needed to raise everyone's awareness of Environmental Health. With less than a handful of seasoned REHS professionals and some newly hired trainees, we got back to basics.

We focused on the core programs. The Food Program had especially suffered. Our list of inventoried facilities was incomplete; data entry of new facilities, closed facilities and daily activities, including inspections, was deficient and sometimes erroneous. It's no wonder that the Food Program and public concern regarding routine inspections wound up in a Grand Jury Report. As a result of MCEHD's response to the Grand Jury and request to our Board, two new staffing positions were allocated and dedicated to the Food Safety program in addition to the existing one full-time program staff; and the three positions were directly under the supervision of the Supervising REHS.

Food Program staff were then trained not only in conducting inspections, permitting new facilities, and enforcement procedures, but also in correct data entry to clean up our data system. Because of the youth of the new staff, data entry and electronic data system training was a breeze. It wasn't long before staff was running reports, correctly entering daily time accounting activities, and tracking food facility permitting, inspections, and compliance.

In 2006, MCEHD conducted 413 food facility inspections; in 2007, the number of inspections increased to 596; and in 2008, 1,396 inspections were conducted. For comparison purposes our facility count went from 309 in 2005 to 623 in 2008 and so far in 2009, 893 inspections have been conducted for the first six months of the year [Appendix A].

Okay, so now we've got a complete and up-to-date inventoried food facility list, inspected the facilities, and have them on a tracking program to maintain the inspection frequency. What's next?

While Food Program staff was busy bringing the inspection program into a maintenance mode, we began looking at other areas of the Food Safety program that needed attention. We noticed an increasing number of outdoor events taking place throughout the County, all with food vendors. Although, MCEHD was receiving applications for some events, many event organizers were unaware they needed a permit and appeared shocked that they had to notify any prospective food vendor to obtain a permit as well. Hmm, they didn't know, or they seemed to have a reasonable excuse for not knowing, because MCEHD was too reliant on the regulated community to come to the County (voluntarily?). MCEHD would occasionally receive notice of an upcoming Outdoor Event from the Planning Department (sister RMA department) when they received an application and there were, of course, annual or traditional events we all knew about, e.g. fairs, picnics in the park, etc. But all we had to do was open up the local newspaper's community event section and see all of the events occurring throughout the County and mostly in the City of Madera. And what about that swap meet every Wednesday right across from our office?

So, we coordinated with City Code Enforcement. There was a problem with illegal food vendors within the City limits and Code Enforcement wanted to conduct joint enforcement at the swap meet. This has led to regular joint enforcement sweeps (yes, even on weekends) with City Code Enforcement officials successfully getting the message out and making a presence [Appendix B]. MCEHD has also teamed up with County Code Enforcement officials, under the Planning Department and within the RMA. Remember, interdepartmental and intra-agency coordination was why we were made a part of the RMA.

In our efforts to protect the public MCEHD also teamed up with local Code Enforcement Officers and Police Departments to educate vendors on proper permitting and safe food handling. Recent news articles published in local papers [Appendix C] have provided an avenue to warn the public about the potential hazards buying whole or cut produce from these street vendors. As a result from these news articles and public awareness of our presence, we receive complaints of these illegal vendors all across the county selling fruit cups and tamales out of ice chests or out of pick-up trucks. This enforcement action has gained public support and has decreased the amount of illegal food vendors on the streets that could possibly contribute to foodborne illnesses in Madera County. In the past few

months the Food Program has permitted numerous new mobile food facilities that were once selling illegally to the public.

So, now the illegal food vendors know who we are; and our inventoried food facilities know who we are; what about the general public? We began providing educational food safety and awareness training workshops [Appendix D] throughout the County. This has greatly enhanced industry and community relations. Our efforts to provide these services to the community have resulted in workshops for temporary food booth operators and organizers, organized camps, and local schools. Environmental Health has also provided educational booths at community events to discuss with the public the importance of food safety. Our restaurant owners also benefit from these services by ensuring proper training tools for their workers and constituents. The feedback from our community educational training workshops has been positive and has resulted in more requests from various community groups. With this increase in communication, compliance, and education with our food facilities across the county, we are moving toward reaching our goal to extend and provide 360 degree services in educating food safety and awareness that encompasses all food facilities. Madera County Food Program has built a strong rapport with regulated business owners in the effort to provide food safety awareness across the board.

The Food Program has sustained these new and improved methods and will continue to advance in areas that will support our community through prevention measures and education. With limited resources, MCEHD routinely seeks and pursues public and private grant sources to sustain and enhance program efforts. Awarded grants will provide important resources in our continuing efforts to achieve improvements in food safety, implement program enhancements, and raise public awareness.

So, you might wonder why Madera County Environmental Health Department is submitting an application for the 2009 Excellence in Environmental Health Award? Is our program creative and innovative? Maybe not to some jurisdictions who have been doing this (and possibly more) for decades, but we have accelerated our program implementation to meet the demand in the last three years. So, to MCEHD, we have implemented creative and innovative methods. Beginning with trainees and a handful of dedicated REHS staff, we have accomplished more in three years than the previous decade with more experienced personnel. In the meantime, these trainees have gone on to successfully pass the Registration exam and are zealously reaching out for more responsibilities within their respective program assignments and even requesting assignments in other areas as well. They work well together as a group and individually; they're becoming program specialists, but also cross-training to help out when the need is there. MCEHD Food Program is excelling in attitude which has led to creative and innovative methods used that previously were not part of the program.

Have we effected problem solving to enhance environmental health in the community? Yes. We have raised public awareness of the importance of food safety and improved our public image. We have a built a team oriented working relationship with Code Enforcement. We have established good communication with local media who have been instrumental in portraying our work in a positive light. This has enhanced the public's perception of our role in protecting the community's health and our efforts to help educate the public and regulated businesses.

Have we improved our productivity? In 2006, we had a staffing allocation of 15 full-time positions including Management and Clerical personnel. By 2008, our full-time staffing allocation increased by three positions for a total of 18 employees. And in 2009, due to budget restraints and the economy, our staffing has been reduced down to 16 full-time personnel. However, in the last three years, we have significantly increased the number of food facility inspections, maintained consistent program implementation and enhanced public awareness and education despite recent cuts to staffing. Improved productivity has led to an improved morale which continues to have a positive affect on productivity.

Is there a cost savings? Doing more with fewer employees is always cost effective. Because the Food Program is up to standards, it is more easily maintained and managed, allowing staff resources to be directed to other environmental health programs. With the reduction in current staff levels, this has been a key in our continuing progress in other environmental health programs. The end product has been a true enhancement in public confidence concerning all MCEHD programs.

Sustained improvements on excellence can be documented by our increasing level of service (number of inspections), improved community relations (newspaper articles), and growing support from our Board of Supervisors

MCEHD continues to reach out and improve communication with industry and the public. We are also planning to present in-service trainings within our Resource Management Agency in order to improve inter-departmental coordination of services within the RMA, and other County and/or City departments/agencies, as well.

Madera County Environmental Health has jumped milestones in the past three years, creating a positive and organized work environment by:


- Initiating program directives,
- Collaborating with other agencies and jurisdictions to further protect the public,
- Providing community workshops to disseminate educational messages,
- Implementing new inspection tools.

To further describe what Environmental Health does we published a brochure to educate the public and constituents of Madera County [Appendix E]

Excellence in employee attitude and aptitude in concert with innovative restructuring within Madera County MCEHD has created a feeling of accomplishment and success within our program, department, agency and those we work with in industry and the public. The MCEHD Food Safety Awareness and Protection Enhancement Program excels because of the dynamic staff that have eagerly embraced the concept of "excellence in environmental health" and created a forward momentum to attain professional and personal achievement. Doesn't this sound familiar? Isn't this how we began our careers? These are the future faces of CCDEH.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit our application. Even if our program is not selected for award, it has given me great pleasure to highlight our achievements and I truly believe that the staff of MCEHD already feels they are on a winning track.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jill S. Yaeger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jill S. Yaeger, Environmental Health Director
Madera County Resource Management Agency

Appendix A – Madera County Improvements
Appendix B – Letter in Support of Grant Application
Appendix C – News Articles
Appendix D – Community Event Workshop Event - Flyer
Appendix E – Environmental Health Brochure