

Food Safety and Security – Crisis Management Are You Prepared?

On February 23, 2006, FRLA participated in *the Florida Food Defense Tabletop Exercise*. The Exercise was hosted by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Division of Food Safety. The purpose of the Exercise was to simulate some of the issues and challenges that a statewide bioterrorism incident would present in an effort to help businesses become better prepared in the event that an actual disaster should ever occur.

The Exercise was well attended by local, state and federal governmental health authorities, FRLA members and staff and grocery stores. Representatives from FRLA included TGIF, Walt Disney World, Hardees Food Systems, Busch Entertainment and Gaston Meredith Consulting as well as FRLA staff. Participants were called upon to respond to various scenarios as if they were actually occurring.

Following the Exercise, staff members compiled some of the information discussed in order to assist you in preparing your establishment for such a challenge.

Food safety and food security are important to your customers and your business. If a food safety or security issue were to threaten your establishment, are you prepared? Do you have a plan in place to limit financial and customer loss and to assist in business recovery?

The threat to food safety is greater than ever before. The international food supply, improper use of pesticides or other, accidental, contaminants and intentional mishandling of food all pose a risk to your business. As a business owner or manager, you can not afford to be caught unprepared.

Based on information shared during the Florida Food Defense Tabletop Exercise, FRLA offers the following recommendations to assist your business in preparing for a food safety threat.

Establish a Plan:

As with all emergency situations, management in the event of a crisis is largely dependant upon preparation beforehand. It is essential that food service establishments have a written plan with a checklist for employees to use as a tool in preparing for and responding to a crisis. The plan should be stored at your business and be readily available to your employees.

The plan should incorporate, but not be limited to:

- What the early signs of a crisis may be;
- Who will handle the gathering of information, such as customer complaints and what information will be gathered;
- Who must be contacted, and how will they be contacted as the crisis begins to unfold;
- Who will manage your employees?;
 - the plan should remind employees exactly how to handle the media;
 - the plan should assist you in evaluating the health of your employees;
- Full disclosure of pertinent information to law enforcement or government officials if necessary;
- Guidance in assigning an appropriate number of staff to handle the situation;
- It should help you conduct a “HACCP”(*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points*) inspection – at what point, if any, in your establishment is vulnerable to potential food safety or food security breaches?
 - what steps do you need to take to correct potential problems?
 - are these steps in line with those of health officials or law enforcement?

As a responsible business owner or manager, it is wise to test your plan periodically. Make sure your employees are aware of the plan and know where it is kept. See to it that all of your employees who deal with the public know what the early signs of a crisis are. Periodically check to ensure that the plan’s telephone numbers and contact names are accurate. Test to make certain your manager-on-duty or person-in-charge can implement the plan effectively. Development and exercise of the plan are important aspects of crisis management that you should take seriously. Taking some time to prepare may assist you when your customers’ health and your business are on the line.

During the Response to a Crisis:

Among the most important things you can do during a crisis is to proactively provide information to those who need it and take the actions as recommended by the food safety and security experts, health officials and law enforcement. Should you have to manage the media, FRLA’s Communications Department is one resource always available to you. You should also appoint one person to work with the media and provide them with factual information on a timely basis throughout the crisis – this will eliminate the problem of multiple or conflicting messages being sent.

Cooperating with health officials and law enforcement is critical. Remind and encourage your employees to offer full and immediate cooperation. Pay close attention to the behavior of your employees and require that all of them “check in” with you at the beginning of a crisis. If you can’t reach all of your employees, you may want to notify law enforcement, particularly if the employee’s avoidance appears intentional.

Recovery:

Business Recovery may be the most difficult part of a crisis. First, you will have to work with your employees to get them back to work. It may be difficult especially if the employees or their families were directly impacted by the incident. The second part of this equation, of course, will be encouraging the customer to visit your establishment again. If you have marketing folks either on staff or on contract, put them to work for you. Have them develop a communications plan to reassure your customers that it is safe to come back. You may also want to work with other businesses in your area or with other restaurateurs to develop a “back to business” plan that you can use, as a group, to assure your customers that a visit to your area or dining establishment will be as good as or better than before.

Crisis Management is up to you. The steps you take today can go a long way toward mitigating the damage should the worst case scenario strike your establishment. FRLA encourages you to protect your business and your bottom line. Be vigilant. Develop a plan. Exercise it.

For More Specific Information:

For more specific information about a Crisis Management Plan or Food Security Issues, contact Geoff Luebke, Vice President, FRLA at (850) 224-2250 extension 249.

Sources:

- CDC, Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication
- ServeSafe Essentials, 3rd Edition, National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation
- 2006 Bioterrorism Tabletop Exercise, State of Florida