

**Region of Waterloo**

**Public Health and Paramedic Services**

**Health Protection and Healthy Environments**

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**To:** Community and Health Services Committee

**Meeting Date:** April 8, 2025

**Report Title:** 2024 Food Safety Program Report

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**1. Recommendation**

For information.

**2. Purpose / Issue:**

This report provides a program update for Regional Council as the Board of Health on Public Health's Food Safety Program in 2024.

**3. Strategic Plan:**

This report aligns with Waterloo Region's 2023-2027 Strategic plan to provide Equitable Services and Opportunities. Public Health supports the community and owners and operators of food premises, in Waterloo Region, to provide food safety services that are inclusive, accessible, and of the highest possible standard.

**4. Report Highlights:**

- In accordance with the Ontario Public Health Standards, Public Health continues to deliver a Food Safety Program aimed at preventing and reducing the incidence of food-borne illness. The program includes routine inspections of food premises to ensure compliance with provincial regulations, facilitation of business and regulatory agency licensing, and investigation of complaints.
- 2024 Program Highlights:
  - Demand for the Food Safety Program has increased, as the population of the Region increases.
  - Public Health conducted 5827 inspections and 565 re-inspections in 2024.
  - The number and diversity of food premises continues to grow. In 2024, there were 3612 food premises, an increase of 3.6% since 2023, and an 18.1% increase in the last 10 years.
  - This increase comes with more diverse food operations with new and

- emerging food trends and processes, resulting in more complex inspections and subsequent re-inspection visits.
- There were 10% more special event notifications that were reviewed in 2024 (398) compared to 2023 (362). Through education and inspections, Public Health supports special event organizers and vendors who provide food.
  - Public Health employs a progressive enforcement approach, working with operators to correct infractions through education and re-inspections.
  - As a result of our growing community and more complex inspections, Public Health continues to employ a risk-based approach to prioritize inspections to minimize potential health impacts to the community.

## 5. Background:

Public Health's Food Safety Program is delivered to meet the requirements in the Ministry of Health's [Ontario Public Health Standards](#), the associated Provincial [Food Safety Protocols](#), and [Ontario Food Premises Regulation 493/17](#), under the [Health Protection and Promotion Act](#).

Food premises are locations where food is produced, processed, prepared, stored, handled, displayed, distributed, transported, or sold. These establishments are classified into three risk categories: high risk (e.g., full-service restaurants, long-term care homes), moderate risk (e.g., fast food restaurants, small grocery stores), and low risk (e.g., convenience stores). The inspection frequencies are once every four months for high-risk premises, once every six months for moderate-risk premises and once annually for low-risk premises.

With the growing number and complexity of inspections, Public Health prioritizes higher risk premises for completion of routine inspections. In 2024, the routine inspection completion rates were 96% for high-risk premises, 82% for moderate-risk premises and 64% for low-risk premises. Other program activities include education for food handlers and consumers; and providing timely responses to requests for service (consumer complaints, outbreak investigations, licensing inspections, special events, and recalls). In 2024 Public Health responded to 2 recalls, including one associated with a large national listeria outbreak involving Silk Almond Milk.

In 2024, Public Health conducted 5827 inspections and 565 re-inspections, an increase in inspections compared to 2023 (2023: 5279 inspections and 608 re-inspections). Inspectors responded to 1061 consumer complaints (up from 872 in 2023), assessed 398 special events (up from 362 in 2023), inspected 33 special events (up from 26 in 2023) and enacted 116 enforcement actions (up from 48 in 2023), including 96 tickets, 2 non closure orders and 18 closure orders. Please see Appendix A for more data related to the Food Safety Program.

Inspectors use a progressive enforcement approach by providing education first and following up with re-inspections as necessary. Enforcement tools, such as tickets and orders, are generally utilized when education fails to achieve compliance, or conditions present an immediate hazard to the public.

The [Ontario Food Premises Regulation 493/17](#) requires that at least one certified food handler be present at all times during operation of a food premises. Public Health partners with Conestoga College to deliver a Food Safety Training Certification program with 665 food handlers certified in 2024. Public Health also provides in person education to community members. In March of 2024, a Food Handler Training Certification course and exam was offered to members of the Mennonite community. Forty-nine people received their Food Handler Training certification.

Food safety inspections can be complex and challenging work, especially as our community continues to grow. There are more special events and food premises, many offering a variety of foods, some of which may be unfamiliar to health inspectors. Public Health inspectors continue to learn about these emerging processes and foods, their ingredients, and preparation methods to ensure safety standards are met.

## **6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public**

**Area Municipalities:** Public Health collaborates with Area Municipalities to provide business licensing approvals for food premises, and to respond to complaints when needed.

**Public:** Food safety information is shared with the public through the Public Health [Food Safety Webpage](#), social media (@ROWPublicHealth), and Regional publications (e.g., Around the Region). The [Check it! We inspect it.](#) website is also available for community members to file complaints about businesses (approximately 65% of complaints in 2024 were submitted via Check it! We inspect it), and to check inspection results which allows the public to make an informed decision about the facilities they choose to purchase their food from. A [Public Health Inspector spotlight video](#) and [webpage](#) were recently created to help the public and business operators better understand the role of a Public Health Inspectors related to food safety and other responsibilities.

To better connect with equity-deserving groups in the community, Public Health has integrated a voice translation service that is available when working with operators who prefer to converse in a language other than English.

Public Health also participated in a wellness fair for newcomers where food safety education was provided, and a session was conducted with the Waterloo Small Business Association to provide education about starting a food business.

**7. Financial Implications:**

Food safety activities are funded within the Department's base budget for Public Health Mandatory Programs; the budget is approved annually by Regional Council (as the Board of Health). Mandatory programs are funded approximately 2/3 (67%) by the province, with the remainder 1/3 (33%) funded by the local tax levy.

For 2025, Council approved two public health inspector position enhancements to support the increasing demands that come with community growth. Additionally, one information assistant position was approved to support mandatory provincial reporting and process efficiencies, enabling inspectors to dedicate more time to fieldwork.

**8. Conclusion / Next Steps:**

Public Health is dedicated to delivering a strong Food Safety Program in our fast-growing region, where the food service industry continues to evolve and grow, along with the community. By continuing to prioritize inspections with a risk-based approach, providing education, and enforcing regulations, we support owners and operators in upholding best practices to reduce the risk of food-borne illness.

**9. Attachments:**

Appendix A: Summary of 2024 Food Safety Program Activities

Appendix B: 2024 Food Safety Program Presentation

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