

Region of Waterloo
Public Health and Emergency Services
Health Protection and Investigation

To: Community and Health Services Committee

Meeting Date: December 6, 2022

Report Title: 2022 Food Safety Program Update

1. Recommendation:

For information.

2. Purpose / Issue:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on food businesses in the community, and also impacted Region of Waterloo's Food Safety Program. During the current recovery phase, Public Health Inspectors will continue to use a risk-based approach when conducting inspections, in order to both protect the public and support food premises operators, as we assist them to attain excellent food safety standards.

3. Strategic Plan:

Focus Area 4: Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities

Focus Area 5: Responsive and Engaging Public Service

4. Report Highlights:

- As with many Public Health programs, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the Food Safety Program. The following examples illustrate the impact of the shifting landscape in the food safety program, and challenges that arose as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - COVID-19 and the [Reopening Ontario \(A Flexible Response to COVID-19\) Act, 2020](#) (ROA) impacted local food premises.
 - Many businesses were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in many business closures.
 - However, current data suggest that the number of new food service businesses have started to increase. Since January 1, 2022, there has been a net gain of 174 food premises, from pre-COVID numbers, resulting in a total of 3329 food premises currently open in the Public Health database (Appendix A).
 - Since COVID-19, there has been an increase in home-based and internet-based food providers.

- Many home-based and internet-based food providers do not make themselves known to local regulators, and therefore bypass the requirements necessary to operate a food premise, such as Public Health inspections and licencing. Their growing popularity is also likely influenced by the increased cost of living and inflation, making cheaper, home-based food options more attractive to consumers and providers.
- Public Health Inspectors continue to take a risk-based approach to re-establishing scheduled food safety inspections; and work to provide a supportive, education-based approach to engaging with food premise operators during this period of recovery, where there continue to be challenges experienced by the food service industry.

5. Background:

Public Health's Food Safety program conducts its work in accordance with requirements outlined 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](#). The overall goal of the program is to prevent and reduce the burden of food-borne illness. To work toward this goal, Public Health engages in the following activities: scheduled inspections and enforcement of food premises regulations; education for food handlers and consumers; and providing timely responses to requests for service (consumer complaints, special events, recalls, etc.).

Public Health inspection is complex and challenging work. While Food Safety is one of the larger program areas for Public Health Inspectors, they are also responsible for Safe Water, Enteric Illnesses, Infection Prevention & Control, Rabies Control, and Health Hazard/Environmental Health Programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic had, and continues to have, a significant impact on the food service industry in Waterloo Region. Food operators were required to adjust operations frequently to adhere to regulation requirements and changes under the ROA, such as changing capacity limits, use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), cleaning and sanitation requirements, installing barriers, and checking for proof of vaccination. Staff turnover was high in food premises, business declined and operational costs needed to be reduced. Collectively, these disruptions also negatively influenced the level of compliance with food safety practices, and the overall number of food service providers over the past few years. Although many premises closed their doors during the COVID-19 pandemic, many new premises have opened, as COVID-19 regulation requirements have been removed, and customers are returning to dining establishments across the region.

This shifting food service landscape presents new challenges for the Food Safety compliance inspection program. In order to return to the excellent standard of food safety previously practiced in the community, Region of Waterloo Public Health is committed to providing support and guidance to the many new and pre-existing operators to reach the high standard of food safety compliance that existed prior to COVID-19. When inspectors engage with business owners they employ a progressive enforcement approach, whereby education and support is the preferred mechanism for addressing deficiencies identified during an inspection. Enforcement tools such as

tickets or orders are used only when necessary to protect the health of the public.

6. Area Municipality Communication and Public/Stakeholder Engagement:

Nil.

7. Financial Implications:

Food safety activities are funded within the Department's existing base budget for Public Health Mandatory Programs; the budgets are established by Regional Council (as the Board of Health). The cost shared Mandatory Programs are funded up to 70% by the province with the remainder funded by the local tax levy.

8. Conclusion / Next Steps:

Public Health is committed to re-establishing excellent pre-COVID service levels, protecting the public from food safety risks and ensuring safe food handling practices locally, by supporting food premises operators through the following efforts:

- a. Public Health will continue to support food premises operators during this time of recovery by:
 - i. Modifying practices to address the needs of operators resulting from COVID-19 stressors.
 1. Examples include:
 - a. During the recovery phase of 2022, Public Health Inspectors made appointments with many operators for the first compliance inspection in order to reduce anxiety and stress of unscheduled inspections for operators and inspectors.
 - b. Taking additional time during inspections to address areas of concern and provide supplementary education.
 - c. Taking time to listen to operators to understand their situation and continue with a progressive approach to enforcement where risk assessment allows.
 - ii. Re-establishing a routine presence in food premises to ensure a high level of compliance to food safety regulations.
 - iii. Continuing to collaborate with Conestoga College to ensure that food handler certification training is available for those who need it. Training and challenge exams are available in languages other than English, where instructors and translated exams are available.
 - b. Public Health will participate in Regional Regulatory Hubs and public health communities of practice to keep abreast of emerging trends, provincially and locally, and to ensure alignment with practices across the province.
 - a. Partnerships developed through the Provincial Multi-Ministry enforcement campaigns for ROA enforcement have evolved, and Public Health is now participating in Regional Regulatory Hubs, which are coordinated by Regulatory Compliance Ontario. The

focus of these hubs is to identify opportunities to collaborate on common enforcement issues, reducing risks at a regional level. These hubs provide inter-ministry and inter-agency supports and guidance from across the province on topics with common interest, such as the growing home-based business trend across Ontario. Local health unit communities of practice also share information and build networks to align work processes in an attempt to reduce inconsistency and frustration for both operators and Public Health Inspectors.

- c. Public Health will continue to educate consumers (the public) to understand the risks associated with non-inspected food providers and learn how to find inspection results to guide decision-making.
 - a. Public Health promotes the Public Health Inspection disclosure website, [Check It! We Inspect It.](https://checkit.regionofwaterloo.ca) (<https://checkit.regionofwaterloo.ca>), which allows consumers to review inspection results of their chosen food service establishment.
 - b. In many cases, internet- and home-based businesses can be inspected and meet compliance requirements, if the business owner has engaged with Public Health to meet the regulatory requirements.
 - c. If patrons have concerns about a local food service business, the “Check It! We Inspect It.” website can be used to report complaints directly online.

9. Attachments / Links:

Appendix A: Total Food Premises in Waterloo Region Pre-COVID and Current

Appendix B: Total Food Premise Inspections Required Annually by Risk Rating

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