



Environmental Health Division
Emergency and Homeless Shelter Alternative Food Program

OVERVIEW: Environmental Health collaborated with non-profit and faith-based organizations to ensure availability of community kitchens to safely produce meals for homeless and emergency shelters.

CHALLENGE: Placer County opened a shelter for thousands of people displaced from nearby Butte County in February 2017 during the Oroville Dam incident. Almost immediately the problem of ensuring a safe food supply was identified, since the shelter facility had insufficient food preparation areas and equipment. The surrounding community was very generous and quick to respond, providing food donations that were well-intentioned but prompted health and safety concerns. Most of the donated food was from home kitchens or other unknown sources, without an adequate methods of controlling food temperatures or providing safe storage for more than a few hours. In these conditions there is a higher risk of a serious foodborne illness outbreak.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTION: Environmental Health had been working on a community-based alternative food source concept to help our local homeless shelter, leveraging relationships with faith-based organizations. We realized that their church facilities could also meet our need to offer a safe food supply in the event of a large-scale incidents. County staff contacted several local religious leaders and offered to evaluate their kitchen facilities and provide a free health permit, enabling them to support the homeless and supply food during emergencies. Environmental Health inspected kitchens to determine if they were in compliance with health and safety requirements and if they had the capacity to produce a large volume of food safely while maintaining proper temperatures and sanitary conditions. Staff also provided training and conducted safe food handling classes, as most of the volunteers possessed little or no knowledge of proper safety techniques when preparing meals for several hundred people. At first, these efforts were met with some skepticism and community organizations seemed fearful of being "inspected" by the county. County management staff then met with the community leaders and visited each facility to explain the program and motivation behind it to gain their support. If the church facility had the equipment and capacity and agreed to allow food production from their facility as a nonprofit venture, the Environmental Health Division would issue a health permit at no cost to their facility. The church benefits from this certification because they can then use their kitchen facility for any other nonprofit event they choose to support, such as a pancake breakfast. And if the church chose in the future to rent out their facility for use as a profit-making venture, the

County would issue a standard health permit for that purpose since the facility was already determined to be in compliance. After successfully implementing the program with faith-based kitchens, we realized a tremendous community-wide resource also existed in other non-profit community kitchens and expanded our evaluations by engaging organizations such as the Elks Lodge, Moose Lodge and the Salvation Army to also provide food during large-scale evacuations. We have secured and broadened our community's emergency shelter capacity in outlying community neighborhoods by locating additional sites where evacuees could be fed safely.

ORIGINALITY: Where community kitchens are not normally approved as food facilities, the Environmental Health Division uniquely leveraged these existing community resources . We found hidden community kitchen resources in non-profit facilities and increased the number of community-wide evacuation shelters capable of shelters capable of serving residents in more remote, rural areas and feeding them safely, rather than having evacuees travel to large urban evacuation centers.

COST EFFECTIVENESS: The cost of the program is negligible. The staff are included in the annual food safety inspection and enforcement budget. Evaluation of the kitchens is performed while staff are in the field performing their normal daily work. The food safety training classes offered to volunteers at no cost is part of the already existing curriculum offered to the retail food industry employees. Only one additional class was added for volunteers to respond to the initial increased in the number of trainees. Since then they have been included as part of the existing training program as space in the regular classes is available.

RESULTS: This program has been successful in increasing the community's approved kitchen resources to ensure food safety in meeting the needs of homeless and emergency shelter operations. In addition, the program expanded the capacity and number of approved alternative non-profit kitchen facilities in the event of a large scale evacuation and temporary sheltering. There are 21 permitted facilities in Placer County that can now serve as a safe food source when needed. The collaborative teamwork that developed between the community and the nonprofit organizations to increase the county's food preparation capacity and shelter resources has been very successful.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS: USB stick with [video](#) attached.