



Taking a big picture approach in environmental public health: PHIs and food security interventions

**NCCEH Workshop Report
CIPHI ON Annual Educational Conference
September 18, 2013**

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Introduction

In September 2013, the National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health (NCCEH) conducted an interactive workshop about “big picture” approaches to public health for the Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors Ontario Branch (CIPHI ON). Objectives of the workshop were:

- (1) to explore how PHI roles fit within broad public health frameworks;
- (2) to highlight proactive ways (best practices) PHIs can work with other sectors to support health and decrease the need to use enforcement techniques;
- (3) to identify needs and gaps to support collaborative approaches, specifically in the context of community-based food security initiatives.

The workshop opened with a brief presentation by Karen Rideout to provide an overview of systems approaches to public health: social determinants of health, the health impact pyramid, healthy public policy, and the use of an equity lens. She addressed how these broad approaches relate to environmental health practice, and introduced some of the issues raised when community-based food security interventions are promoted and regulated by different sectors within public health.

Ellen Desjardins from the University of Waterloo provided background to concepts such as “community food security” and “food systems” and outlined some of the common food safety challenges with community food security initiatives. She then shared some of her experiences working on community food security issues at Waterloo Public Health, using the examples of small scale food processing, farm to school programs, donations to charitable food programs, institutional procurement of local foods, and direct farm sales. Ellen highlighted issues faced by inspectors and program operators and suggested options for education and research.

Ron de Burger explained issues of mandate, authority, and responsibility for food safety within public health. He also shared experience working on innovative approaches to food safety at Toronto Public Health. He highlighted lessons learned from programs to improve access to street food, working with social services to enhance employability and food skills, and nutrition labelling on menus. Ron’s presentation illustrated how collaboration across sectors enhances food safety and environmental health practice.

Following the presentations, participants shared personal experiences with food security interventions and discussed scenarios designed to highlight a range of issues and approaches. Each group shared examples, experiences, concerns, and gaps relating to their health protection role in the context of community food security initiatives.

The ideas generated by participants are summarized in this document, which is intended to provide guidance on priority areas where action is needed. Practitioners identified a collection of best practices focussed around communication and process, as well as a list of needs and gaps, which are organized into major themes around knowledge, resources, and networks. *This document is a summary of ideas generated in the workshop, and does not necessarily reflect the views of each individual participant.* It is intended to serve as a starting point for further discussion and development of resources, and is not a comprehensive list of best practices or needs and gaps.

Best Practices

Communication – Collaboration

- Develop partnerships and networks within public health and across sectors: health protection, food security, nutrition, health promotion, small business, community groups, etc.
- Collaborate across jurisdictions. There should be consistency of approach and messages across health units and ministries.

Communication – Education

- Provide information regarding why specific food safety regulations exist.
- Provide guidance for specific groups to clarify responsibility and roles with respect to food safety: consumers, donors, recipients, etc.
- Education:
 - PHIs – new or novel processes, small scale processes
 - Consumers – what to look for when buying food
 - Producers/Processors – food handling training
 - Food handlers
 - Other professionals – e.g., nutritionists and health promoters

Process – Timing

- Consultation before enforcement—Early involvement of PHIs can help identify potential issues and find solutions early on, avoiding closures and other regulatory responses.

Process – Other

- Use risk assessment framework—Establish minimum requirements for operation and phase in additional safeguards based on assessed risk level. Keep detailed records of strategy, agreements, and milestones.
- Balance enforcement with health promotion efforts (e.g., education).
- Need to “think outside the box” when providing guidance.

Needs and Gaps

Knowledge

- A consistent and sustained public campaign could educate people about food safety issues in the home, as well as what to look for when purchasing food from shops, farms, markets, or other sources. Such a campaign might include school-based programs, point of sale information (e.g., targeted materials offered in supermarkets during canning season), or other publicly available information.
- PHIs may not know about many new or small operations (e.g., home-based caterers or on-farm processing) until there is a complaint.

Time and Resources

- There is a need for more education, but PHIs often do not have time to engage in health promotion work or build customized compliance programs.
- Specific evidence-based guidelines are lacking, e.g., home canning, farmers markets, use of “approved sources” for ingredients, use of produce from school gardens, farm gate sales, food donations and expired foods.
[Possible role for NCCEH, Public Health Ontario, University of Guelph, or others.](#)
- Need for translation of educational materials to multiple languages.

Networks

- A province-wide online discussion forum would facilitate knowledge sharing and learning from others’ experiences. This would be particularly useful for novel processes or events.
[Possibly hosted by CIPHI ON?](#)
- Opportunities for operators to consult with PHIs outside of enforcement scenario would facilitate education and cooperation.

Conclusion

The goal of this workshop was to identify best practices, needs, and gaps for PHIs responsible for food protection in the context of community food security interventions. Participants identified the need for increased communication and collaboration across regions and sectors, as well as increased education and guidance for all stakeholders.

This workshop was made possible through financial contributions from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Ontario Branch of the Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors.