Retail Virtual Inspections and Food Safety Checks

COVID-19 Response

South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control
Healthy People. Healthy Communities.
How it started

• Food team leader was contacted by a contractor that needed a pre-operational/permit inspection. How could we do this and maintain social distancing when we were restricted from going to the facility?
• Contractor asked if we could do it via FaceTime.
• Team leader contacted program leaders and we decided to try it as a pilot.
A virtual inspection SOP was developed that includes instructions on how to set up and conduct the inspection.

The program developed disclaimer language to be included on the inspection form that would allow for any item not observed during the virtual inspection to be addressed at later on-site inspections.

Developed an acknowledgement of the inspection email exchange protocol to use in lieu of signatures.
Food Safety Checks

• A virtual Food Safety Check Protocol was developed as a limited scope food safety inspection based on the virtual permit inspection protocol.

• Positive features of a Food Safety Check:
  o Allows for social distancing.
  o Provides the necessary level of food safety information for most operations to conduct day to day business.
  o Non-graded, focused on compliance assistance and education.
  o Provides additional guidance tools via links in the form.
  o Takes approximately 30 minutes to complete.
Food Safety Check Form

• We created a form in our electronic reporting system that is distinct from our regulatory inspection form.

• Questions were designed to get the info on how they are operating.

• Narrowed down the items checked to the major risk factors; removed all Good Retail Practices.

• Questions are “conditional” and allow for the inspector to put in comments.
Food Safety Checks

- From April 6th – May 29th, 1666 food safety checks have been completed.

  - Feedback continues to be positive.
    - Allows for an interactive and risk focused discussion that encompasses more than food code.
    - Provides food safety validation for promoting consumer confidence as the completed checks are posted on our website as well as a list of facilities that have completed a check.
Lessons learned

• Don’t be afraid to try something out as a pilot, if it fails, there is no long reaching harm. You will learn from the failure as well as the success.

• Using a pilot approach gives you the opportunity to fine tune the protocols needed for full implementation.

• Announced inspections can be a useful compliance tool. They are less stressful for the operator and can foster a more engaged relationship where the operator takes more of an active managerial role in food safety.
Future Uses?

• We’ve expanded the use to include change of ownership permit inspections by doing both a virtual permit inspection and a food safety check at the same time.

• We have a process in place for using video conferencing as part of a manufactured food inspection when needed to prevent lengthy personal contact.

• Other announced inspections such as follow up inspections seem like a good fit for virtual protocols. We will be piloting a process once routine inspections resume.
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