

## **Southwest Border Food Safety and Defense Center: Creative Ideas for Promoting Food Safety and Food Protection**

### **Abstract**

Foodborne illness has a significant impact on public health and consumer confidence in the U.S. The Southwest Border Food Safety and Defense Center was established to provide educational programs, trainings, and workshops to address the health and well-being of consumers as it relates to food safety and food protection. A partnership between New Mexico Cooperative Extension, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, and the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security, the Center is the only facility of its kind in the U.S. This article describes its role and highlights the methods used to reach residents in a largely rural state.

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## **Introduction**

Foodborne illness significantly affects public health and consumer confidence. It is estimated that foodborne illness in the United States is associated with 48 million illnesses, 128,000 hospitalizations, and 3,000 deaths annually (CDC, 2014).

Located on the New Mexico State University (NMSU) campus, Las Cruces, the Southwest Border Food Safety and Defense Center (hereafter, the Center) promotes educational programs, trainings, and workshops in New Mexico (NM) with a focus on the health and well-being of consumers as they relate to food safety and food protection. A grant-funded partnership between the NMSU College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES), the New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA), the NMSU Cooperative Extension Service (CES), and the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security (NMDHS), the Center is the only facility of its kind in the nation.

## **Selected Program Highlights**

Six part-time staff members work as a team to organize and support the mission of the Center. They are: the NMDA Biosecurity Director, NMSU Extension health specialist, NMSU Extension District

Department Head, NMSU program specialist, NMSU social media specialist, and a college work study student. County Extension agents partner with the Center to deliver the educational programs.

## Backpack Program

A backpack program markets and promotes food safety guidelines and practices. Each year, the Center distributes over 4,000 backpacks to youths and adults. The backpacks, branded with the Center logo and filled with educational materials, are provided free to consumers (Figure 1).

Guion, Simonne, and Easton (2004) reported that youth are interested in safe food handling practices, including hygiene and proper hand washing practices, food storage, and heating and cooling food. Therefore, backpack materials include fact sheets; guides and documents focused on safe food handling, storage, and preparation; and food and refrigerator thermometers. Distribution occurs in conjunction with educational programs and/or presentations held at local, county, and state events (e.g., county/state fairs, health and wellness fairs, food preservation programs, and more).

**Figure 1.**

Sample Backpack with Educational Materials



## County Food Protection Alliances

The 2012 Food Safety Modernization Act strategizes a formal system of collaboration that works in an integrated way to be proactive rather than reactive in food safety issues. The Act recognizes a federal-state and local capacity-building partnership as the key to food safety and protection. (Food and Drug Administration, 2014).

The NM Food Protection Alliance conference is coordinated by the Center. This annual event (2010 – present) brings together food producers; local, state and federal agencies; as well as tribal governments to discuss important food safety issues and enhance state food safety programs. To

better strengthen partnerships and communications between local and state agencies, Extension agents are encouraged to form County Food Protection Alliances (CFPAs). The goal at the county level is to build local partnerships and conduct trainings in a coordinated manner to ensure quick and efficient response to food safety situations.

At a minimum, alliance members represent Extension, health departments, environmental health offices, public/private schools, food banks, community health educators, and elected officials. County meetings are scheduled at the discretion of the alliance members. Activities, funded through the Center, include: food safety-related tabletop exercises such as the Food and Drug Administration (FREE-B) Wilted Woes, on-site visits to local food producers, and presentations by emergency managers.

To date, NM is the only state to offer this level of collaboration. County home economics agents take leadership because, traditionally, their program areas are directly related to food safety and protection. Currently, more than one-third of NM counties report active Food Protection Alliances.

## **Social Media**

Using the Internet to inform consumers about food safety issues is not a new phenomenon. Online databases and websites provide sources for information retrieval (foodsafety.gov; Taylor & Curtis, 1999). The Center manages three food safety focused social media outlets: Blog, Twitter, and Facebook.

The NMSU Food Protection Blog, launched in 2012, was a means to archive food recalls and allergy alerts affecting NM and surrounding states (Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas). Prior to the blog, recalls and alerts relevant to NM were distributed to Extension faculty and staff through the university electronic mail system. In response to requests for a searchable database to archive the postings, the blog was developed. Although the database was created with a vision for statewide use, the blog is viewed by an international audience.

Center staff determined that using a variety of social media outlets would result in a wider reach. Therefore, a Twitter account was created as a companion to the blog. All postings on the blog are automatically posted to Twitter. Twitter offers an official "follow" button that enables site visitors to become Twitter followers with just one click.

In response to requests by NMSU Extension faculty and staff, a Facebook page was created (2013). County home economics agents reported using this social media more often than others to disseminate information to residents. Research has shown that Facebook is the most utilized social media (Pew, 2014; Smith, 2013). Another vehicle for reaching a wider audience, the NMSU Food Safety page, posts food recalls, allergy alerts, and food safety-related articles, research results, and news items.

## **Implications**

Through the SW Border Food Safety and Defense Center, the NM Cooperative Extension Service provides leadership in bringing new partners to the table to address the issue of food safety and

protection. Together, these partners developed innovative strategies (e.g., County Food Protection Alliances, social media) for local stakeholders to more easily mobilize when faced with a food-related incident. These strategies can be easily replicated in other states.

Distributing backpacks filled with food safety information is an effective way to reach not only youths, but also adults in the home. Anecdotal evidence suggests that families benefit from this program as adults integrate the information into their food safety practices. Sponsorships from community organizations can be a source of funding for the program.

Through its grant-funded partnership, the Center is able to provide incentives—generally in funding—to those delivering the educational programs and backpacks. For future growth, it will be necessary for the Center to explore and secure funding.

## Conclusion

The Southwest Border Food Safety and Defense Center provides food safety and protection education and training. Reaching diverse audiences in a largely rural state takes some creative planning. Using a variety of methods, the Center effectively engages, educates, and informs New Mexico residents.

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