



Food Safety and the Role of the Environmental Health Specialist

The Environmental Health Specialist can take on many roles such as a regulator, investigator, educator and an enforcer. Sometimes, the dominant role can depend on what type of environmental health program the Environmental Health Specialist is currently working in at a place in time. If they are evaluating a lot for suitability for an on-site sewage treatment system, they are predominately a regulator. If they are responding to an indoor air quality complaint, they are predominately an investigator. An Environmental Health Specialist can be in many different roles just throughout one workday. This seems to be most true when an Environmental Health Specialist is working in a food safety program.

The Regulator:

An Environmental Health Specialist working in a food safety program is a regulator. They are put in that role to make sure that food service establishments are in compliance with whatever mandated food service rules and regulations are in place. They perform this role by conducting routine inspections of food service establishments. With the exception of opening or follow-up inspections, the inspection is unannounced so that an inspector can get a true picture of the overall conditions of a food service establishment and the establishment is given a rating as a numerical and letter grade to indicate the condition and operation at the time of inspection of the establishment in relation to the applicable food service rules and regulations (See Rule .10(2)(a), (b), (c), and (e) of Chapter 511-6-1).

The Investigator:

Another role of an Environmental Health Specialist working in a food safety program is as an investigator. The inspector will respond to complaints made by the general public or another governmental agency on a food service establishment. The inspector will investigate the complaint in a timely manner to see if it is valid and in violation of any of the applicable food service rules and regulations. At that time, the environmental health specialist will take appropriate action. The Environmental Health Specialist will also work hand and hand with epidemiologists to investigate foodborne illness outbreaks to try and determine the source food and what type of biological or chemical agent caused the illnesses (See Rule .10(4)(a), and (b) of Chapter 511-6-1).



The Educator:

One of the most important roles of an Environmental Health Specialist assigned to a food safety program is as an educator. Without providing education to food service operators, both parties, inspector and operator, will have a very difficult time in regulating and operating an establishment. Education is the key to helping the operator to understand how to be compliant with the rules and regulations. The education should start from the moment the operator comes forward with plans to operate an establishment and throughout the time period in which the establishment operates. The inspector should be knowledgeable on all aspects of the rules and regulations in order to provide the most correct information to the operator. The inspector should also keep himself or herself up to date on the most current food service technology. Both operator and inspector will have to become certified food service operators through state approved testing.

The Enforcer:

Probably the least pleasant role of an Environmental Health Specialist working in a food safety program is as an enforcer. When all avenues of regulation, investigating and education have failed to bring a food service operation in compliance with the rules and regulations, enforcement is a necessary tool. Enforcement usually comes in the form of formal hearings, issuing of citations, and in extreme cases, closure of the food service establishment. A closure can be temporary or permanent.

All of these roles of an Environmental Health Specialist are important for the success of any food safety program. The ultimate reason for these programs is to ensure the protection of public health.