Food and Beverage Safety Essentials for Housing Programs and Housing Events

Key elements of a successful community event include great company, creative programming, and enjoyable food and drink. When it comes to food and drink (e.g., consumables), your organization may be the primary provider, whether for an entire event or a portion of it. This role comes with added responsibility, as serving food and drink introduces potential risks and liabilities should any problems arise.



To minimize your exposure to claims or lawsuits, it's essential to be fully prepared. Implementing strict food safety protocols can help prevent personal injury claims and foster trust among both staff and attendees. Taking these precautions ensures a safer, more confident experience for everyone involved.

Training and guidelines

By establishing clear guidelines and ensuring your staff is properly trained, your organization will be well-equipped to handle any issues that may arise during events or whenever food is served to the community.

You and your staff can pursue food service training and certifications based on local requirements. Additional steps to enhance safety and compliance include:

- **Consult with your local health department or food safety officials** to ensure you meet all food service regulations.
- **Develop written guidelines** for volunteers and employees responsible for serving and distributing food under your organization's name. Guidelines should provide some specifics on food storage,

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food preparation, and the hand-off to the consumer. Communicate these guidelines and expectations before each event.



- **Establish food safety guidelines** for the intake of donated food items for staff to determine what can and cannot be accepted.
- **Train staff to recognize potential food safety issues**, especially when dealing with food prepared off-site or by volunteers. This is particularly important for potluck-style events.
- **Implement a vetting process** for external vendors and volunteers to ensure they meet your standards.
- **Ensure staff are trained** on the proper use of equipment related to food service and distribution.
- **Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) training** to address any operational or work-related hazards that may arise during food handling.

Safe food service practices to remember during food service activities

Maintaining cleanliness, proper sanitation, and ensuring foods are thoroughly cooked are key to preventing bacteria growth and illness. Follow these essential guidelines:



- **Prioritize cleanliness and sanitation.** Staff should wash their hands frequently, wear gloves when necessary, sanitize utensils and surfaces before and after use, and use proper cleaning methods. Never leave raw food residue on any surface.
- **Keep raw and cooked foods separate.** Especially with meats, store uncooked and cooked items in separate, clearly labeled containers. Ensure that raw and cooked foods are handled using different processes and tools to avoid cross-contamination.

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- **Thoroughly cook all foods.** Follow cooking temperatures as specified on packaging or by the raw food supplier. If no temperature is provided, refer to FDA cooking guidelines.
- **Maintain safe food temperatures.** Serve food items at their recommended temperature, keeping them hot or cold as required. Take precautions and maintain procedures that reduce injuries to others via heated food or beverages.
- **Use safe water.** Only use potable drinking water or bottled water for cooking and food prep. Non-potable water should never be used in food service operations.

Preventing foodborne illness

Foodborne illness, or food poisoning, occurs when contaminated food or drink containing bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins, or chemicals is consumed. To reduce the risk, follow these key practices:

- **Maintain safe food temperatures.** Keep hot foods at or above 140°F and cold foods at or below 40°F. Use thermometers to assist with accuracy related to temperature controls.
- **Limit exposure to room temperature.** Never leave meat, poultry, eggs, fish, or shellfish (raw or cooked) out at room temperature for more than 2 hours.
- **Adjust for hot weather.** If the outdoor temperature is above 90°F, refrigerate food within 1 hour—this is especially important during summer gatherings like picnics.



- **Cool leftovers promptly.** Refrigerate leftovers as soon as everyone has finished eating.
- **Store in smaller portions.** Use shallow containers to cool leftovers quickly and evenly.
- **Don't rely on reheating.** Reheating food left at room temperature for an extended period does not make it safe to eat.
- **When in doubt, throw it out.** If you're unsure how long food has been stored or have any concerns about its safety, discard it. Adhere to "Best by" and "Use by" dates on packaging.
- **Check packaging.** Be mindful of ruptured, damaged, or missing packaging. Never serve prepackaged food with broken seals, as it could pose a serious health risk.

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Refrigeration

Temperature control is critical to food safety. Properly storing food and drinks can greatly reduce the risk of bacteria growth, which occurs rapidly between 40°F and 140°F. Ensuring consistent temperature control is essential in any food storage process.

There are two common methods for keeping food at safe temperatures:

- **Mechanical refrigeration** is ideal for long-term storage and typically offers more capacity with better temperature regulation.
- **Coolers or ice chests** are suited for temporary, short-term storage but require frequent monitoring to maintain safe temperatures.

Outdoor grilling

Grilling often involves high temperatures, but proper food preparation and safety protocols are still essential. Consider the following:

- **Defrost properly** to prevent bacterial contamination.
- **Thoroughly cook frozen meat,** which takes longer than fresh or refrigerated meat to reach safe internal temperatures.
- **Avoid cross-contamination** by using separate utensils and surfaces for raw and cooked foods.
- **Use two thermometers** to monitor food temperatures and prevent cross-contamination.
- **Designate warming zones** on the grill to keep cooked and raw foods separate.
- **Train staff** in safe food handling before allowing them to prepare and serve on-site food.



Grill Maintenance and Safety:

- **Sanitize grilling tools** and use protective gear like gloves and eyewear to prevent injuries.
- **Clean the grill thoroughly** before use. If using a wire brush, inspect for loose bristles, as these can cause serious injuries. The AARP reports 130 ER visits annually from wire bristle ingestion.

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- **Replace damaged cleaning equipment** and follow the grill manufacturer's cleaning instructions. If unavailable, refer to the CDC's cleaning guidelines.

Safe Food Service Protocols:

- **Plan for safe food storage** between the grill and serving areas to maintain proper temperatures.
- **Use separate utensils** for raw food prep and food service.
- If offering **self-service,** ensure:
  - Hand sanitation methods are available.
  - Food temperatures are regularly checked.
  - Utensils are sanitized before switching.
  - Foods are covered to prevent contamination from insects and rodents.
  - Raw and cooked foods are not left unattended to avoid accidental distribution of undercooked food.



Food Pantries

When providing space for food storage, it's essential to follow proper protocols to ensure food safety:

- **Establish an intake and distribution process** to ensure thorough inspections for food safety.
- **Reject any prepackaged food with broken seals**, as this poses a risk of severe foodborne illness.
- **Ensure appropriate shelving and storage** for food items—for example, keep refrigerated snacks in designated refrigeration areas.
- **Understand the shelf life** of the foods you plan to distribute to ensure quality and safety.



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Consider event liability insurance

It's not uncommon for events to have food and alcoholic beverages available for attendees. However, alcohol comes with the inherent risk of damages to both property and individuals, which could put your organization on the line without the proper coverage, and poorly prepared food can cause illness. You can read more about event liability insurance, scenarios in which liquor liability insurance covered housing authorities from claims, and more on the HAI Group Blog.

Contact your account services representative if you are a current policyholder and would like to learn more about event liability insurance.

Contact Now



Third-party versus in-house services

Depending on the size of the event and the number of registered attendees, hiring a third-party vendor to supply food and drink might benefit your organization. However, if you are considering outsourcing to a vendor, we strongly recommend a hold harmless clause or indemnity clause that protects your organization from food or drink-related illness or injury.

Some benefits of outsourcing to a third-party vendor:

- Transference of risk for food-related claims.
- Food preparation typically takes place in a commercial-grade kitchen.
- Trained staff will be on site.
- The vendor is responsible for food prep, setup, serving, and cleanup.
- The vendor supplies their equipment. If your organization does not typically hold events, this can result in significant cost savings.

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Bottom line

Implementing safe food practices is crucial for any community event. With the right training, clear guidelines, and a strong focus on food safety, your organization can confidently minimize risks and provide enjoyable, worry-free experiences for everyone involved.

If you have any questions about your food safety protocols, please contact the Risk Control and Consulting team.



Interested in working with HAI Group to manage your agency's risk?

Contact us for assistance and answers today!

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