

Restaurant reports go online in Camden County

By JANE ROH • Courier-Post Staff • April 30, 2010

CAMDEN — Camden County debuted a new service Thursday on its website that allows access to restaurant and cafeteria inspection reports within seconds. Officials said Camden County is the first in New Jersey to offer the service.

"Constituents who go out to dinner and have kids in school will now have this information at the click of a button," said Patrick Shuttleworth, director of health and human services, at a news conference.

The department's 10 full-time inspectors have moved from paper to digital reports. Inspectors now use a computerized checklist to better ensure consistency, and they save time by being able to file reports instantaneously. Inspection reports are considered public information and can be requested on site at eating establishments or via an Open Public Records Act request. This service on the Web allows prospective diners to check on a number of establishments within minutes.

"This is not a "gotcha program.' We're not out there to get the restaurants," said Freeholder Carmen Rodriguez, liaison to the department. "What we're actually hoping is that restaurants will be in better compliance because they're going to have a better idea of what it is we're going to look for."

Gloucester and Burlington counties post health inspection ratings for eating establishments at their respective websites, but not the actual reports.

Ralph Green, director of the division of environmental health, said Camden County inspectors visit an average of three locations per day. There are an estimated 3,500 commercial eating establishments in the county.

Connie Correia-Fisher, an owner of the Pop Shop in Collingswood, said the new system also was beneficial for proprietors.

"Most restaurants, ours included, spend a lot of money making sure that things are safe and clean and that we're using the proper sanitation methods," she said. "If you have a good report, obviously, you want your customers to know that. As a consumer, I'd want to know that there's a standard and that it's being evenly applied throughout every place I ate."

With the new itemized digital checklist, it's easier to know what the rules and regulations are and how to avoid crossing them, both Correia-Fisher and county officials said.

Reports on about 75 percent of the county's eating establishments, including school cafeterias, are online. The rest are expected to go up by the end of the year. The website allows users to sign up for e-mail alerts to let them know when a particular restaurant or school cafeteria has been inspected.

Inspection assessments fall into three categories: satisfactory, unsatisfactory or conditional. But specific violations also are described.

For instance, a note on Pennsauken High School's assessment mentions some dishes 🍽️ were not being kept at safe temperatures. On the other hand, The Tortilla Press, Sagami and Blackbird in Collingswood received minimal health violations.

The Pop Shop especially is popular with young children, a number of whom have food allergies 🍽️, Correia-Fisher said. For many of her clients, careful food handling and preparation is about more than germs and bacteria.

"That's a huge responsibility and we take that responsibility very seriously with all of our customers," she said. "Especially kids, because they're the ones who are going to get sickest fastest if there's something wrong."

The county will pay a maintenance fee of \$15,000 annually for the Garrison Enterprises Digital Health System. A demonstration of that system, which also is used statewide in Pennsylvania, inspired Green a couple of years ago to pitch the online database to county officials.

"It's a great tool in terms of consumer protection to know that inspections will be public," said Justin Fleming of Pennsylvania's Department of Agriculture 🍽️.

He said there had been more than 20,000 page views of the state's inspections report database since November.

Camden County officials said the new streamlined inspection process saves time and money. Green said inspectors already were seeing stepped-up compliance among eateries.

"I don't know the statistics or if they are out there, but what we've found since we started filing electronic reports . . . is that compliance has certainly picked up," Green said. "Folks know they're going to be online and they want to put their best foot forward."

Green also noticed a marked improvement among the public schools, where he said compliance was difficult in the past.

"Now that we're educating them on the process, we find they're complying with what we're asking them to do," Green said.

"When we go through an inspection, it's a breeze because they know what to do and what we're looking for.

"As a supervisor, at least every four to six weeks I would get a phone call -- "I can't understand the inspector's handwriting. I don't understand the violations.' Ever since we started using this inspection format, we have not received a single phone call," said Barbara Waterson, director of the food surveillance unit.
