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Training of Staff of Official Food Safety Control Services

(Prepared by the United States of America)

Background:

There are a number of challenges in training staff of official food safety control services in today's changing environment. Some of the most significant challenges include limited resources, reaching a geographically dispersed workforce; ensuring ethical behavior; and keeping pace with changes in industry, science, and regulatory developments. An effective training program must consider and address all of these challenges to ensure that official food safety control services are adequate to protect public health.

Discussion:

Initial considerations: Public health agencies must consider the training staff as key players in carrying out their mission and in implementing specific food safety programs. What is the mission of the agency? What work must be done by what staff in order to meet that mission? What competencies must the staff have (i.e. knowledge and skills) in order to meet that mission, and what training is necessary to help assure the staff has those competencies. Finally, post training evaluation is essential to assure the training has been effective in helping the public health professional do their her job. The results of that assessment should be used to plan future training activities.

Limited resources: Most agencies or organizations have limited staffing and funding and must prioritize to target mission-critical programs as the focus for spending training resources. Prioritization can be difficult in a changing environment. Once a decision is made that a particular program is critical, a parallel decision must be made to provide the supporting training to assure competent staff are ready to implement that program. Mechanisms must be established to set these priorities both in the short term and the long term. One example of such a mechanism is to establish a governing board of key stakeholders to gain consensus within the organization on how to allocate resources. All opportunities for leveraging resources must be considered including sharing projects with organizational units that have a similar mission or a strong interest in the outcome of training. Partnerships with academic institutions and industry trade associations can extend the reach of training programs through the sharing of physical infrastructure and equipment and of instructors with food safety expertise.

Geographically dispersed workforce: Individuals engaged in official food safety control services are typically employed throughout a geographic region. It is not always cost effective to bring all persons together for face-to-face training. In addition, coverage of work assignments must be

considered. Electronic methods of training, such as computer-based training, web-based training, and video teleconferencing offer solutions to this challenge. This method is particularly effective when the content of the training involves an update to foundational training, or when the training covers a minor policy change. It can also be effectively applied for intermediate or advanced training. For foundational training (entry level), when face-to-face interaction with an instructor may be important to help ensure a good understanding of complex regulatory issues, regionalizing training can lower costs and decrease the time to train the workforce. And in other cases, developing common training materials, training trainers to use the materials, and then having the trained trainers go into the field to provide face-to-face training is the desired delivery mechanism. In any case, the training must be designed based on expected learning outcomes of a specific audience. A blended learning approach is generally most effective.

Ethics training: It is extremely important for regulatory agencies to avoid corruption and maintain credibility and integrity in the food inspection system and work force. Thus, ethics training is an important part of any training program. It is best approached with a combination of good personnel management, a system of positive incentives (such as awards for exceptional service and successful outcomes), and regular compulsory ethics training

Keeping pace with changes: The training staff must have a mechanism for maintaining awareness of important changes that require updating of the training curriculum. Because of the ever changing environment, the training staff must be vigilant in making sure content delivered is up to date. Ongoing review of training needs, learning objectives, content, delivery vehicles and intended students is critical. Using electronic methods for developing course material ensures easy modification of materials. An organizational link between policy development, training, and technical assistance for the workforce can help ensure that training is accurate and current with policy issuances.

Recommended features for a training program:

- On-going strategic planning linked to budgeting that incorporates the plans of key customers.
- Regular evaluation of training efficiency and effectiveness through tracking performance indicators.
- The training staff must have ongoing contact with key customers both within the food safety control agency and outside the agency enabling a continuous audit to answer the following questions: Is training producing the expected competency in staff? Are there new competencies that must be developed and are other competencies no longer required?
- Coupled with all training, evaluations/assessments must be built. To measure what is learned in a class or via a distance learning vehicle. and whether or not the staffer is able to demonstrate in the workplace learned knowledge and skills.

Conclusions:

Although there are a number of challenges that must be considered in training staff of official food safety control services, they can be addressed effectively. Training must be looked at as a critical function of any public health agency. To shortchange training is a decision to sacrifice the potential for success of the agency. Once a decision is made to implement a certain program, a parallel decision must be made to develop and deliver adequate training for the staff who are to carry out that program. New learning technology provides additional options when training vehicles are being considered. As agency program directions will be ever changing, so must the associated training needs change to meet those new directions. Use of technology and sharing information and resources are additional strategies that will help ensure that training programs are delivered in a timely manner and are keeping pace with the constantly changing needs.