



C. Guidelines adapted for multiple agency structures

Most foodborne illness complaint systems are managed by the Environmental Health staff at LHDs that also license and inspect restaurants and other food service establishments. This has the immediate benefit of linking the complaint to the official most likely to be aware of conditions at the establishment that may require additional assessment or intervention. However, this structure may not be the most effective approach for foodborne illness complaint systems to serve as surveillance to identify outbreaks in a larger community setting.

Larger community settings may require linking the foodborne illness complaint data to communicable disease surveillance data maintained by other staff at the same LHD. Linkage between complaint data and results of pathogen-specific surveillance are much easier to accomplish if complaint systems are centralized at the same jurisdictional level as pathogen-specific disease surveillance. This may occur at the level of the LHD, or between individual City-based Environmental Health staff and County-based communicable disease program, or at the state level. Such a shared/centralized system should enhance the ability of agencies to detect and respond to possible foodborne outbreaks, but should not prevent any participating jurisdiction from fulfilling whatever role is required by law or is determined to be necessary to protect health in the jurisdiction's area.

When multiple LHDs serve a larger metropolitan area, they should aggregate data to allow complaints to be cross-referenced across agencies to identify a common food establishment, food source or event. City- or county-specific complaint systems are more likely to fail to recognize independent complaints that name the same food source, if the complaints are made to different city/county health departments.

All jurisdictions should have a process to ensure that complaints not under their jurisdiction are forwarded to the proper authority. This includes forwarding complaints between LHDs, from LHDs to state Departments of Agriculture or Health, and from LHDs and state agencies to FSIS for meat, poultry and egg product-related complaints or to FDA for complaints related to other food items in interstate commerce.