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Dubai Municipality tightens food safety; enforces PIC program

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Dubai Municipality has announced the launch of Person in Charge (PIC) programme for food establishments as a constructive step to tighten food security in the emirate.

"From January 2011, it will be a requirement for all food businesses to have a Person-in-Charge (PIC) trained and certified in Food Safety," said Khalid Mohammed Sharif, Director of Food Control Department in Dubai Municipality while addressing a press conference held at Armani Hotel, Burj Khalifa.



"The PIC can be the owner of the business or a designated person, such as a shift leader, chef, kitchen manager or similar individual who is always present and involved in the work site and has direct authority, control or supervision over employees who engage in the storage, preparation, display, or service of foods," he said.

Sharif said the PIC will actively manage food safety practices in an establishment and will be accountable to his employer and the government for making sure that they and the employees on their shift are following established policies and procedures for food safety.

Detailing the reasons behind launching such a programme, he said: "Food safety is a critical part of operating a food business. Illnesses resulting from improper food handling and preparation result in unnecessary human suffering and a lot of financial loss."

"Dubai Municipality monitors food safety standards and conducts inspections at the food businesses throughout the emirate to help prevent food related problems from occurring," said Sharif.

Food safety and the PIC programme

"From the business perspective also, operating a safe, hygienic food establishment can help prevent illnesses and makes good economic sense. A well-run operation protects public health, cuts down food waste, attracts customers and reduces the risk of negative publicity," he pointed out.

Talking about the importance of such managerial control on food safety activities, Sharif said: "Food businesses are key contributors to the Dubai economy and have a strong reputation for providing safe food to consumers. However, we do come across food businesses that violate food safety regulations and it is worrying that some businesses do it more often than others and put consumers at risk.

"In such establishments, owner or managerial control on food safety was found to be very poor. People in the



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managerial role were either not trained well or not involved in enforcing food safety practices in their business," he noted.

"For the success of any type of business, managers play an important role. In the same way, managerial control is critical to ensuring food safety in a food business and we need well-trained managers who can take food safety related decisions rightly and quickly. We realised that training programs in the past were focused on food handlers who often find it difficult to put into practice what they have learned in the trainings because of the lack of facilities or encouragement from the management," Sharif said.

"From a regulator's point of view, the food inspectors find it difficult to communicate with the food business when there is no designated person or point of contact. This often leads to a lot of confusion about what is the right thing to do when it comes to food safety. Unless there is a responsible person present in the facility, inspectors cannot provide recommended corrective actions for the violations found during the inspections," he said.

"The same happens when a consumer tries to report a food complaint to the business. Very often customers find it difficult to get the right person to talk to about the complaint," Sharif pointed out.

"When it comes to the trade sector, some of these food trading companies violate regulations while importing food into the country and most of these problems are detected at our ports. Such foods are either rejected at the ports or discarded and this causes huge economic loss to the trader. It is also a lot of unnecessary work for all involved. Many of these problems can be prevented if a trader has a good understanding about the food standards and related requirements and corrects it at the country of origin," he explained.

Modus operandi

Talking further about the PIC programme, Sharif said: "The mandatory food handler training will formalise skills and knowledge by requiring completion of accredited training program. Dubai Accreditation Department will accredit the awarding bodies that manage the training programs. Awarding bodies that work with us are Highfield Awarding Body for Compliance (HABC), TSI, and Chartered Institute of Environmental Health. The awarding bodies will develop training programs along with the Food Control Department and specially train and certify the trainers who provide PIC training."

"The PICs will be trained on local food regulations in Dubai and focus on training managers in following food inspections and taking corrective actions when necessary, following up and responding to customer complaints, etc. The specialised training for PIC involved in trade will focus on providing information on food import regulations, labelling, microbiological and chemical standards and so on," Sharif said.

He said trainings will include basic food hygiene principles and practices. "The most important part will be that of 'self inspection' where the PICs will be taught to inspect their own establishment. The trainings will be offered in English first and by the first quarter of next year, training programs will be delivered in Arabic, Malayalam and Urdu. A handbook will be published with all the necessary information for the PIC to operate a safe food business," informed Sharif.

"After the training, PICs should be able to use the knowledge to observe practices and behaviours related to food safety as it applies to their businesses, give feedback and training to staff based on the results, and provide motivation for continuous improvement. They have to help employees at all levels of the organization to do the right things and ensure that they are committed to food safety," he said.

"Though we have not finalised the training fee, it will be approximately Dhs250 for Level 1 training, Dhs500 for Level 2 training. The certificate will be valid for 5 years," said Sharif.

How the programme will help

"We believe that the training will help many of the food businesses that regularly violate rules, either because they are not aware of the rules or they ignore rules because of lack of management commitment. Knowledge about the legal requirements and training to achieve food safety objectives should help the industry reduce the violations and the economic burden caused by fines. The food establishments will also benefit from increased food quality and safety," he said.

"To give an example in 2009, 2.8 million metric tons of food was imported, and about 0.5 million tons were rejected at our ports. This mainly happens because the importers do not follow the requirements and food standards. Mandatory training of the managers in a trading firm would help them understand the regulations and also help them to achieve them. The course will help them solve problems at the source (the country of origin). This will subsequently reduce food wastage and enhance food trade," said Sharif, adding that increased food safety will reduce food borne illnesses and that is what consumers really want.

"The training sessions will start from December 2010. We hope to see that at least one person is trained as a PIC in all food establishments by December 2011. The first step for the industry will be to nominate a person as the PIC and register their names at the Food Control Department. Once the registration is done, the PIC has to attend the training and pass the examination." Sharif pointed out.

"With a well-trained Person-in-Charge communicating with the department as well as the consumers, we can ensure a well run, economically sensitive operation, as well as providing for the protection of the public health," said Sharif.

There are several states in the US and in Australia that require a certified food safety manager with a role similar to that of the PIC. There is enough data available in these regions to prove that there was better compliance with food safety laws and improved food safety outcomes in these states.



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