

Engaging the Public and Restaurant Industry to Enhance Food Safety in Portland, Maine

2009 - 2010

Environmental Public Health Leadership Institute Fellow:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The results of the first ever Portland food safety assessment in 2008 raised many concerns. Restaurants were being inspected infrequently. Some restaurants had not been inspected for over 3 years. These findings in conjunction with the lack of available food safety resources, an elevated Salmonella rate as compared to the Healthy People 2010¹ standard, an absence of transparency for the inspection process and results, a city budget crisis with too few inspectors and no history of previous system-level attempts to enhance food safety, spurred the newly formed Environmental Health & Safety program of the Public Health Division to take action.

Traditionally, resources have been allocated to passive surveillance, investigation and enforcement. Few resources remained for prevention efforts. After assessing the economic and political environment and conducting extensive research, including key informant interviews about best practices in peer and regional communities, the following package of interventions was proposed:

1. Revise the city ordinance to require a Certified Food Protection Manager² per establishment.
2. Implement a voluntary Food Excellence Award to encourage and recognize industry excellence in food safety.
3. Post restaurant inspection ratings and a copy of the inspection form online to enhance the level of transparency, accountability and empower the consumer.
4. Develop a public and industry food safety webpage to provide accessible educational information.

This comprehensive food safety intervention approach will help shift the burden from the currently passive, knee-jerk reaction system to a more proactive system that will intervene earlier upstream and hopefully produce better and healthier outcomes in the long-term downstream.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND:

Portland is the largest city within Cumberland County and has a permanent resident population of approximately 63,000³. During the daytime, the population of Portland doubles to approximately 130,000 because of inward migration for work and school from surrounding communities. Millions of tourists visit Portland each year. The downtown section of Portland is located on a peninsula and Portland has several island communities as part of its municipality. Cumberland County includes 28 towns and over 275,000 residents. Portland has received the following recognitions:

- #1 in America's Most Livable Cities (*Forbes*, 2009)
- America's Foodiest Small Town (*Bon Appétit*, 2009)
- #1 in Small Business Vitality (*American City Business Journals*, 2005)
- #2 in Heart Friendly Cities for Women in Small Metropolitan Areas (American Heart Association, 2008)
- #6 in Top 10 Places to Live (Relocate America, 2007)
- #7 in 100 Best Art Towns in America (*The Countryman Press*, 2005)

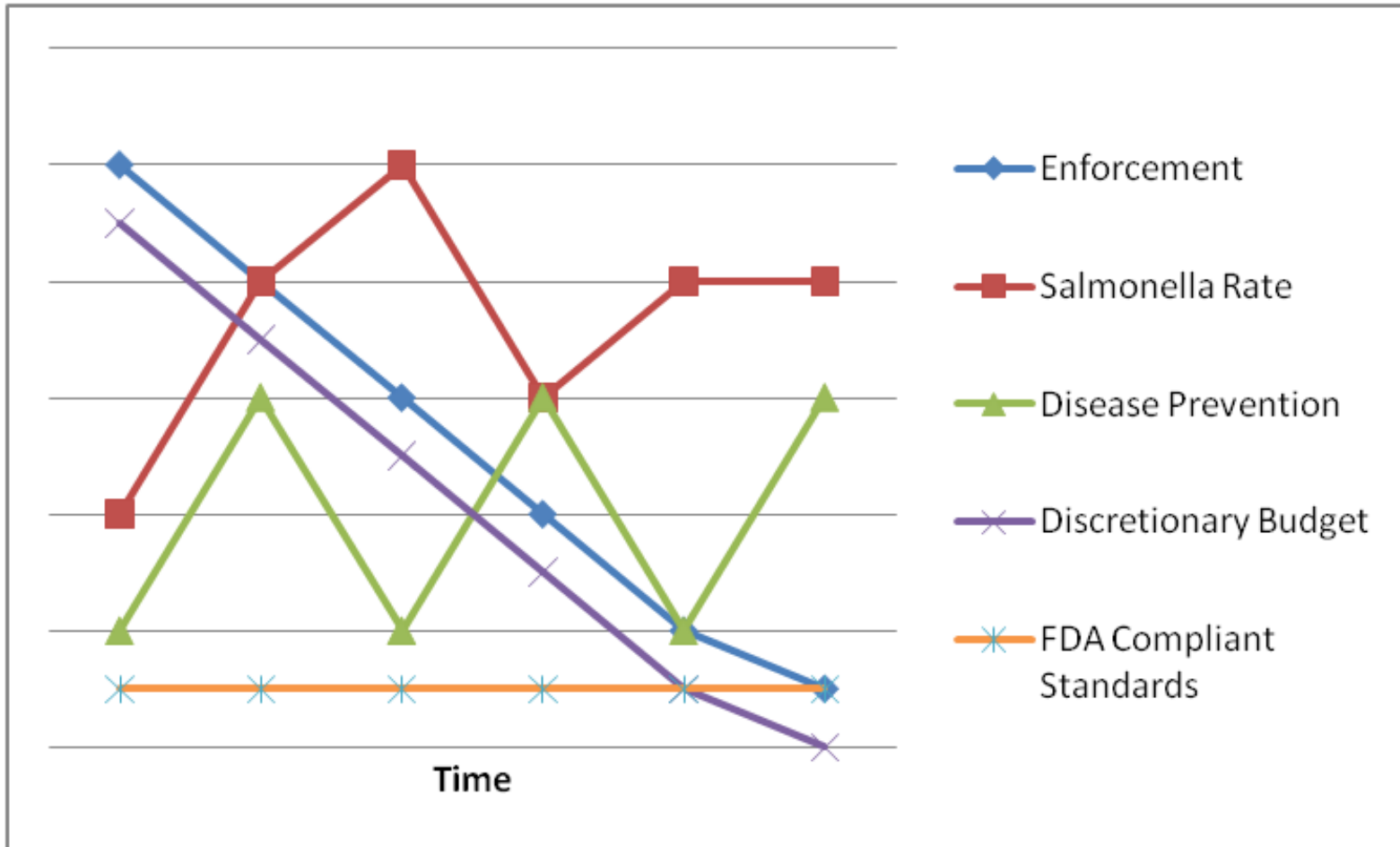
The Maine Centers for Disease Control and Prevention delegates authority to Portland to conduct restaurant inspections but provides no resources. There are approximately 700 food service establishments in Portland. There are no city inspectors dedicated solely to restaurant or health-related inspections. City inspectors are responsible for building, plumbing, electrical, housing, solid waste, land use and restaurants. The number of inspectors has decreased as resources have been cut city-wide due to budget issues.

Foodborne illness in the United States is estimated to cause 76 million cases of illness, over 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths each year⁴. Unfortunately, many more cases of foodborne illness go unreported. There is no history of previous systematic efforts to improve the level of food safety in Portland. There have been sporadic and isolated attempts to educate restaurant operators once they fail an inspection and to educate the public once they have been diagnosed with foodborne illness.

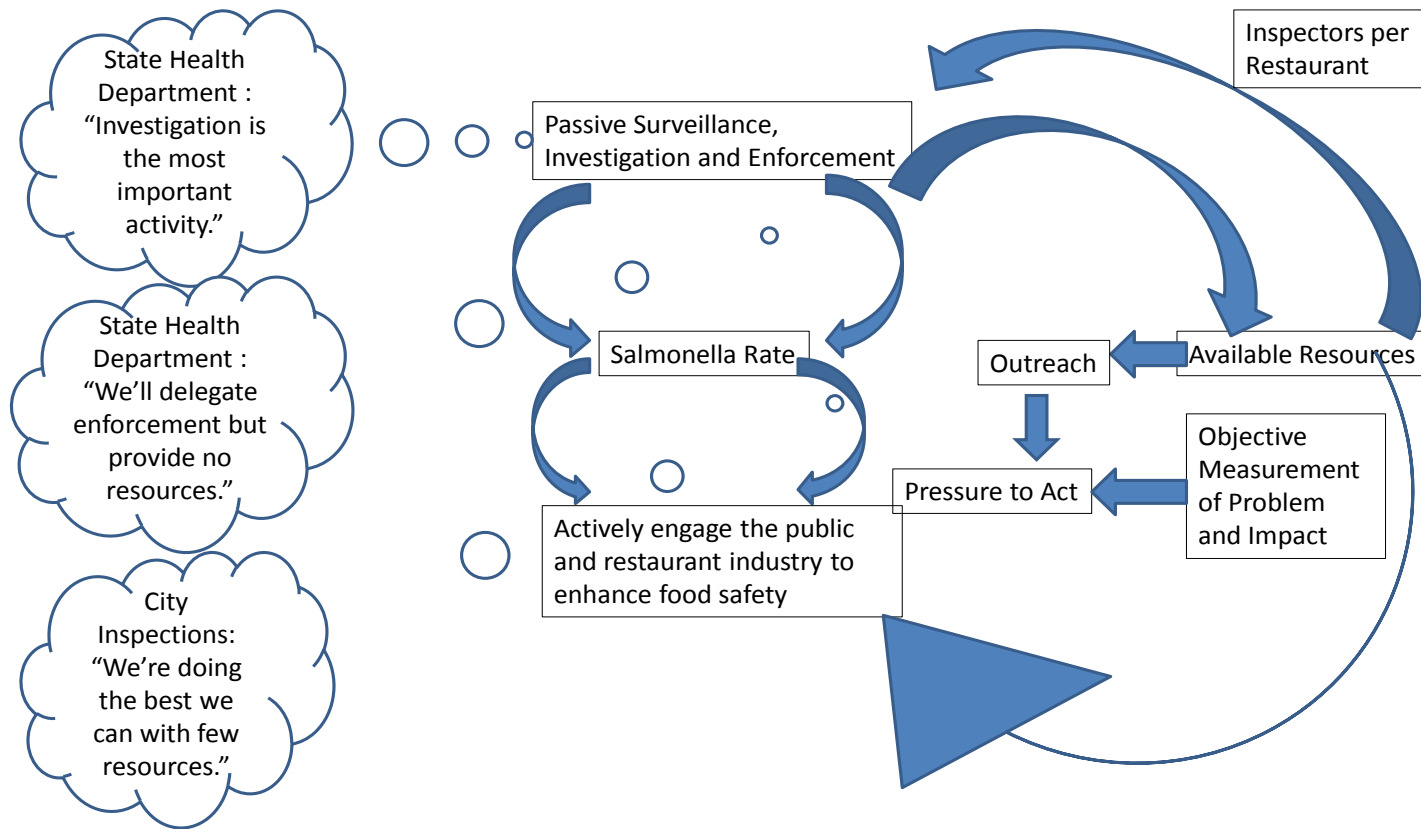
Problem Statement:

“Why, despite previous efforts, hasn’t the city of Portland been able to successfully engage the public and restaurant industry to enhance the system level of food safety?”

Behavior Over Time Graph:



Causal Loop Diagrams and applicable Archetypes⁵:



Shifting the Burden

10 Essential Environmental Health Services⁶:

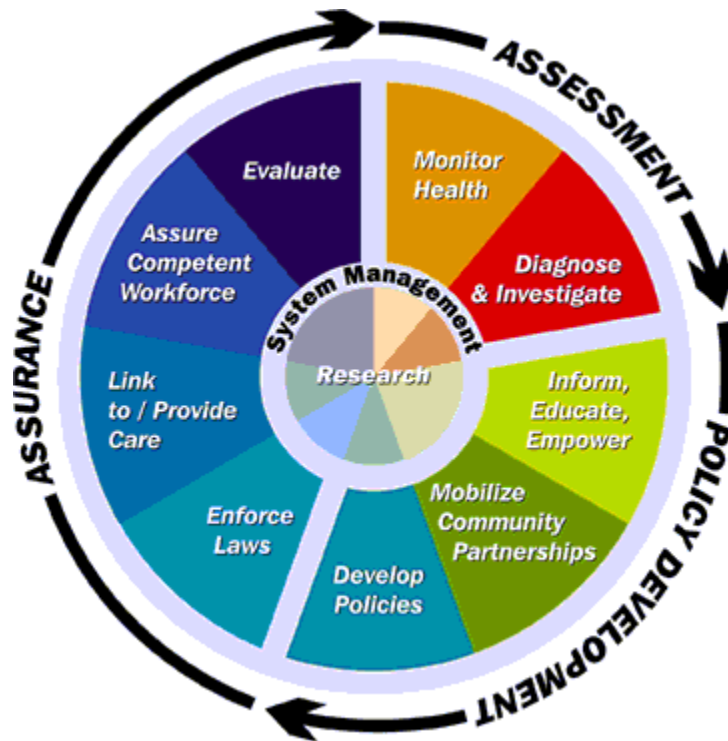


Figure 1: Reprinted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "Public Health in America"

- 1. Monitoring Health Status to Identify Community Health Problems:** The reported number of foodborne illness cases for Portland and surrounding communities will be one of the many indicators used over time to evaluate the effectiveness of this project's proposed interventions.
- 2. Inform, Educate, and Empower People About Health Issues:** This project has proposed several ways to further inform, educate and empower people about health issues. First, posting restaurant inspection ratings to the city website was recommended, so this public information is more accessible. This would include the entire inspection form and an evaluation rating for each restaurant. This information will be updated quarterly. Second, a food safety website for the public and restaurant industry was also recommended and has been developed. Lastly, a voluntary Food Excellence Award has been created for restaurants to provide an incentive for meeting several food safety criteria. Those establishments meeting the application requirements will be recognized before the city council and presented with an award plaque to be visibly displayed at their restaurant. This will communicate to the public that these restaurants have met and exceeded basic food safety standards.

- 3. Develop Policies and Plans that Support Individual and Community Health Efforts:**
A revised city ordinance requiring at least one Certified Food Protection Manager per restaurant has been reviewed by legal counsel, the Health and Recreation Committee and will be submitted to the full city council for approval.

National Goals Supported

This project supports several of the National Goals contained within the CDC Health Protection Goals⁷, Healthy People 2010, National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services⁸, and the Environmental Health Core Competencies for Local Environmental Health Practitioners⁹.

1. This project supports Objective 38 of the CDC's Health Protection Goal – “Healthy Communities.” Objective 38 states, “Promote safe and high-quality air, water, food, and waste disposal, and safety from toxic, infectious, and other hazards, in communities.” By trying to enhance the level of food safety for the community, both within restaurants and homes, this project promotes safe and high-quality food.

This project also supports Healthy People 2010, Goal 10 – Reduce foodborne illness, Objectives 10-5 Increase the proportion of consumers who follow key food safety practices and 10-6 Improve food employee behaviors and food preparation practices that directly relate to foodborne illnesses in retail food establishments.

2. This project supports the following goals of the National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services:

Goal I. Build Capacity – By making public information accessible, inspection results transparent and empowering the consumer and educating the industry.

Goal VI. Create Strategic Partnerships – By partnering with restaurants, inspectors, and the public to enhance the level of food safety in our community.

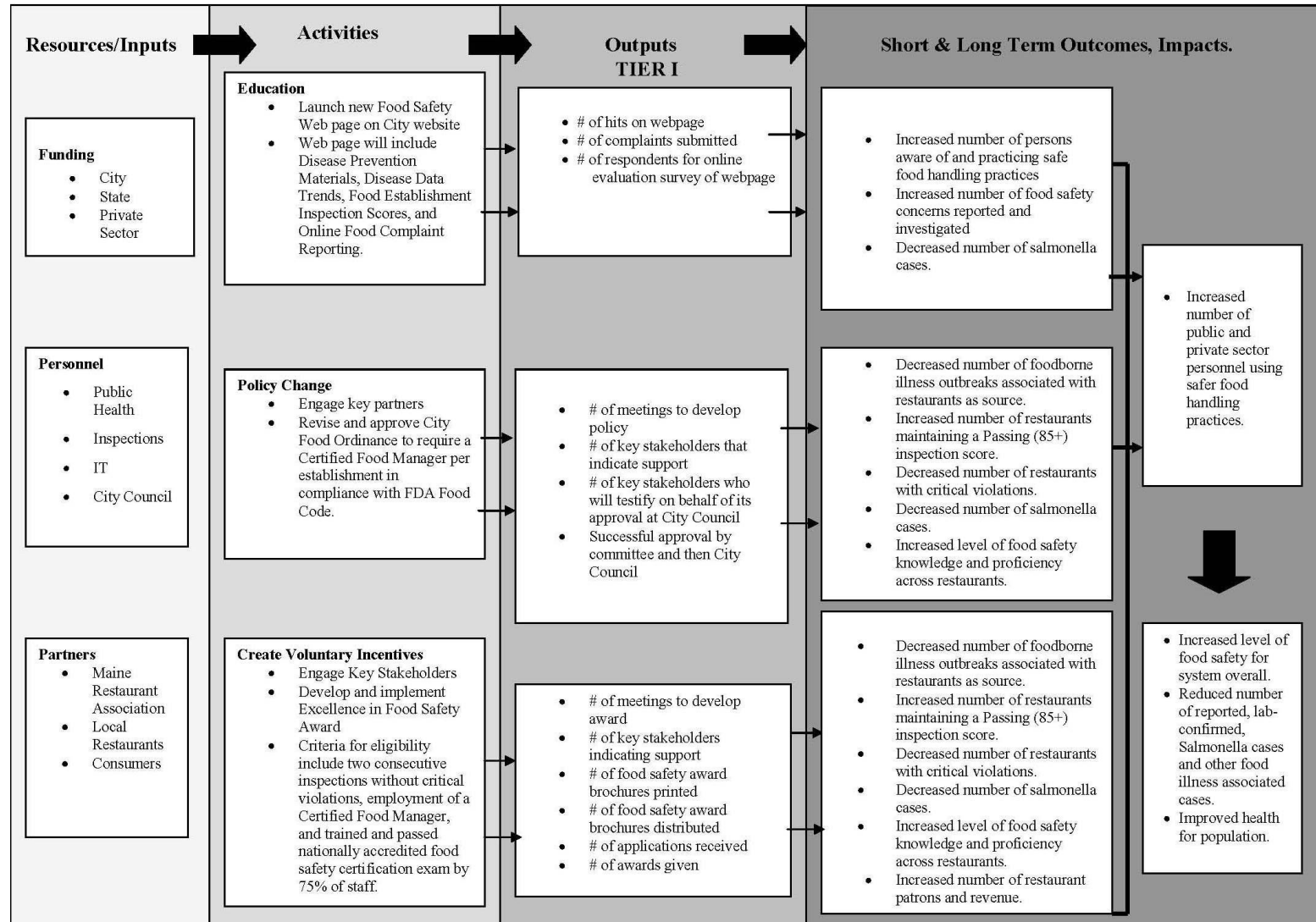
3. This project supports the following Environmental Health Core Competencies for Local Environmental Health Practitioners:

B7 Partnering: The capacity to form partnerships and alliances with other individuals and organizations in order to enhance performance on the job.

C2 Communication: The capacity to effectively communicate risk and exchange information.

- **Project Logic Model:**

Goal: Enhance the level of food safety in Portland, Maine



PROJECT OBJECTIVES/DESCRIPTION/DELIVERABLES:

Program Goal: To enhance the level of food safety in Portland, Maine.

Health Problem: Elevated Salmonella case rate per 100,000 (Cumberland County)¹⁰.

Outcome Objective: Portland restaurants will be compliant with FDA Food Code recommendations and community-based food safety best practices by December 31, 2010. By December 31, 2011, there will be a 25% reduction in the Salmonella case rate per 100,000.

Determinant: Lack of awareness and compliance of FDA Food Code and community-based food safety best practices in our community by restaurant personnel and the general public.

Impact Objective: By December 31, 2011, 90% of restaurants in Portland will demonstrate an increased awareness and commitment to food safety by meeting the FDA Food Code recommendation of employing a Certified Food Protection Manager. Through this requirement, restaurants will also demonstrate an increase in food safety knowledge by having at least one employee pass a nationally accredited exam to become a Certified Food Protection Manager.

Contributing Factors:

1. Lack of awareness on the importance and best practices of food safety in the home and restaurants.
2. Lack of voluntary compliance by restaurants to employ a Certified Food Protection Manager.
3. Lack of perceived incentives for restaurants to employ a Certified Food Protection Manager.
4. Insufficient number of restaurant inspectors to enforce regulations and meet FDA food code standards.

Process Objectives:

1. By December 1, 2009, the city council will approve a revised food safety ordinance that requires all restaurants to meet the FDA food code by employing a Certified Food Protection Manager.
2. By September 15, 2009, implement the Portland's Excellence in Food Safety Award.
3. By September 1, 2009 launch new food safety webpage on city website.
4. By December 1, 2009 launch the restaurant inspection score database as a new feature to the city food safety webpage.

METHODOLOGY:

1. By December 1, 2009, the city council will approve a revised food safety ordinance that requires all restaurants to meet the FDA food code by employing a Certified Food Protection Manager.

Event: Approval of revised ordinance by city council.

Activities:

Draft revised city ordinance with Inspections Division and Maine Restaurant Association.
Receive approval for ordinance by Health and Recreation Committee
Receive approval for ordinance by the full city council

2. By September 15, 2009, implement the Portland's Excellence in Food Safety Award.

Event: Excellence in Food Safety Award implemented in conjunction with National Food Safety Month.

Activities:

Draft Award Brochure
Gain Health and Recreation Committee support for Award
Gain Maine Restaurant Association's support for Award
Develop Award
Advertise Award
Process first batch of applications
Present Award at city council

3. By September 1, 2009 launch new food safety webpage on city website.

Event: Webpage launched in conjunction with National Food Safety Month

Activities:

Develop webpage
Gain support of senior health and inspections leadership
Gain support of Maine Restaurant Association
Launch webpage and online survey to evaluate webpage

4. By December 1, 2009 launch the restaurant inspection score database as a new feature to the city food safety webpage.

Event: Restaurant inspection score database launched.

Activities:

Develop database.
Test database.
Gain support for database from Maine Restaurant Association and senior city health leadership.
Identify process support for updating and quality assurance.
Develop rating system.
Make completed restaurant inspection forms accessible by clicking on a hyperlink.
Evaluate interest by volume of web hits.
Post brief evaluation survey for database.

This project has continuously evolved since its inception. The time to lay down the foundation was longer than anticipated and required educating many stakeholders in repeat sessions. There were some unforeseen political, technological and personnel hurdles that also delayed milestone completion dates.

NEXT STEPS:

1. The food safety webpage was completed and launched on schedule. The restaurant inspection score database passed technological hurdles and has the support of the senior health leadership and Inspections Director. The Maine Restaurant Association has consistently been opposed, citing a lack of public interest and ability to comprehend. Representative restaurant owners were supportive if it was framed correctly. All reasonable efforts have been made to meet the Maine Restaurant Association's concerns and we will proceed to launch the database.
2. The revised city ordinance has been reviewed by health and inspections personnel, legal counsel and the Health and Recreation Committee of the City council. All parties support the revisions to require one Certified Food Protection Manager per restaurant. This needs to go before the full City council for approval. It is anticipated the Maine Restaurant Association will speak in opposition at the public hearing not to the ordinance, but to the inspection score database.
3. The Food Excellence Award has been drafted and is ready for printing and distribution. The program will initially be evaluated quarterly for the first year and then annually thereafter. There is ongoing discussion about the application fee amount.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:

1. The database will be launched and used by the public for selecting restaurants. It is also expected that the transparency of scores will inspire restaurants that do not currently meet or exceed food safety standards to make every effort.
2. The city ordinance will pass with little to no opposition and each restaurant will have a Certified Food Protection Manager. The manager will help train other staff and decrease the incidence of food illness associated with restaurants.
3. Interest in the Food Excellence Award will steadily increase over time, until the majority of restaurants have achieved the award within 5 years of implementation. This will be an incentive for restaurants to meet and exceed food safety standards.
4. The food safety webpage will help educate restaurant managers, owners and the public and lead to a reduction in the number of new foodborne illness cases.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

Michael A. Russell

My experience with the Environmental Public Health Institute has been very rewarding and educational. As the first Fellow from Maine, I have particularly appreciated the networking opportunities with other environmental public health professionals from such diverse backgrounds. It is nice to know that I'm not alone in my environmental health programmatic struggles to make our world a better and healthier place. I look forward to supporting each other as alumni. The Individual Development Plan and the 1:1 mentoring opportunity were very helpful for providing professional development insights and strategies. I am very appreciative for this experience and thank all of you who have made it possible.

ABOUT THE EPHLI FELLOW

Mike Russell is the Program Manager for Environmental Health & Safety at the Public Health Division in Portland, Maine. He has been with the Public Health Division for six years and previously worked as Project Manager in the private sector. In addition to Environmental Health, he also covers public health preparedness. Mike has a Master of Science in Health Policy and Management and is also certified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a Master Exercise Practitioner for public health disasters.

Mike enjoys many activities. He spends as much time outside as possible by downhill skiing, hiking, camping and mountain biking. When inside, he practices Aikido at a local dojo, reads voraciously, takes art classes at a local college and regularly applies the principles of physics and geometry to spherical objects in the game of billiards.

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