

Food Safety and Environmental Public Health

Tom Kunesh, RS

August 4, 2026

Presentation to the Joint Meeting of the Whatcom County Public Health
Advisory Board and The Whatcom County Board of Health

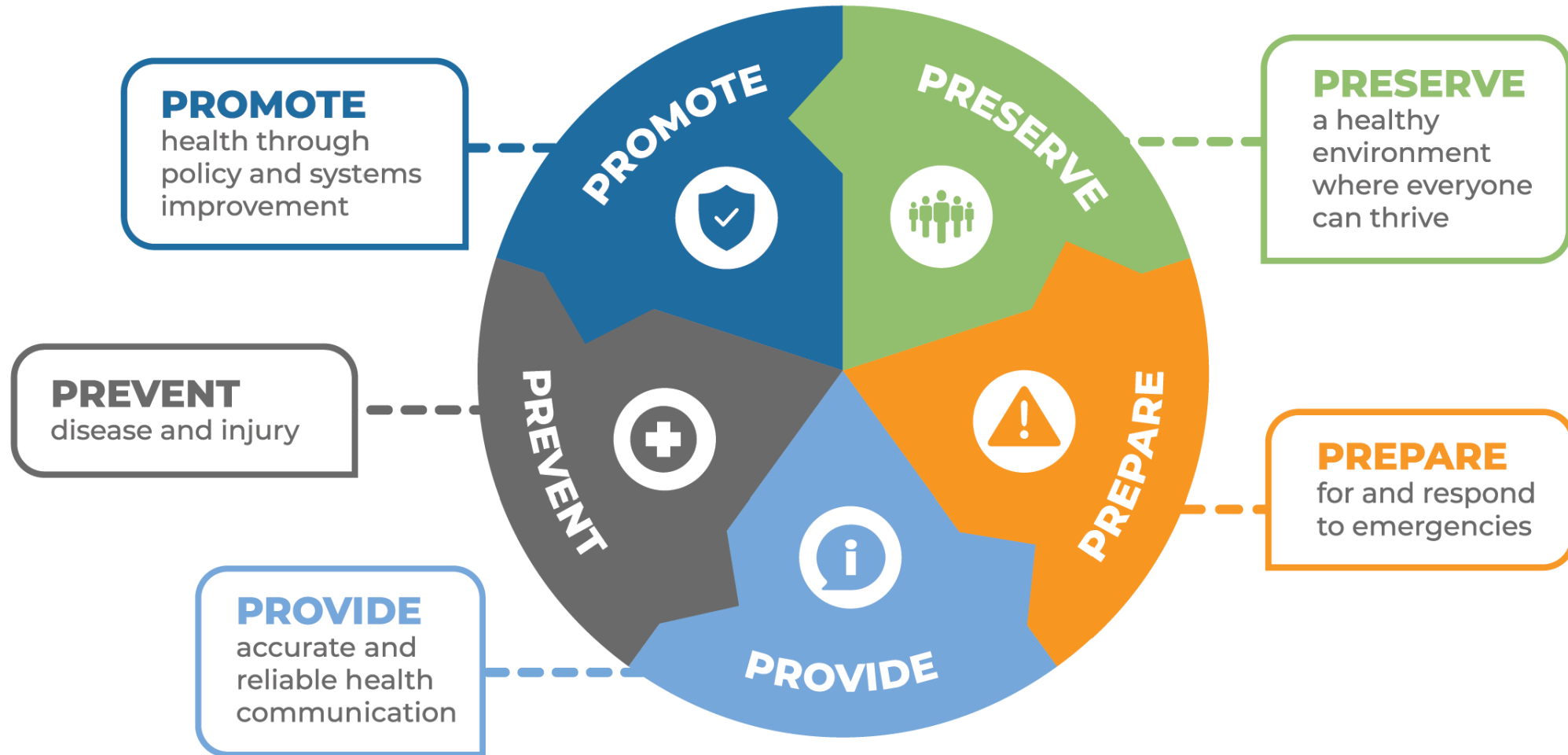


WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



OUR PURPOSE:

We serve Whatcom County by
ADVANCING EQUITY & **PARTNERING WITH OUR COMMUNITY** to:



**Public Health Success
Requires us to
Learn from the Past**

Causes of Death 1900 USA



1. Pneumonia
2. Tuberculosis
3. Diarrhea, enteritis ...
4. Diseases of the Heart
5. Intracranial Lesions
6. Nephritis
7. All accidents
8. Cancer ...
9. Senility
10. Diphtheria

Causes of Death 1926 USA



1. Diseases of the Heart
2. Pneumonia
3. Nephritis
4. Cancer ...
5. Intracranial Lesions
6. Tuberculosis
7. Accidents, excluding motor vehicle
8. Premature Birth
9. Diarrhea, enteritis ...
10. Motor vehicle accidents

Causes of Death 1932 USA



1. Diseases of the Heart
2. Pneumonia
3. Cancer ...
4. Intracranial Lesions
5. Nephritis
6. Tuberculosis
7. Accidents, excluding motor vehicle
8. Premature Birth
9. Motor vehicle accidents
10. Diabetes Mellitus

Causes of Death 1964 USA

Mortality from 20 Leading Causes of Death: United States, 1964

Rank Order	CAUSE OF DEATH
	ALL CAUSES -----
1	Diseases of heart-----
2	Malignant neoplasms, including neoplasms of lymphatic and hematopoietic tissues -----
3	Vascular lesions affecting central nervous system -----
4	Accidents -----
...	Motor vehicle accidents-----
...	Other accidents -----
5	Certain diseases of early infancy-----
6	Influenza and pneumonia, except pneumonia of newborn-----
7	General arteriosclerosis-----
8	Diabetes mellitus -----
9	Other diseases of circulatory system -----
10	Other bronchopulmonic diseases -----
11	Cirrhosis of liver -----
12	Suicide-----
13	Congenital malformations -----
14	Other hypertensive disease -----
15	Chronic and unspecified nephritis and other renal sclerosis -----
16	Ulcer of stomach and duodenum -----
17	Hernia and intestinal obstruction -----
18	Infections of kidney -----
19	Homicide -----
20	Tuberculosis, all forms -----
...	All other causes-----

What Changed?



1906
Federal
Meat
Inspection
Act



1914
US Public
Health
Service
Drinking
Water
Standards



1924
First
Pasteurized
Milk
Ordinance



1938
Food, Drug,
and
Cosmetic
Act



1945
Washington
Water
Pollution
Control
Commission



1955
Sewage
Control
Rules

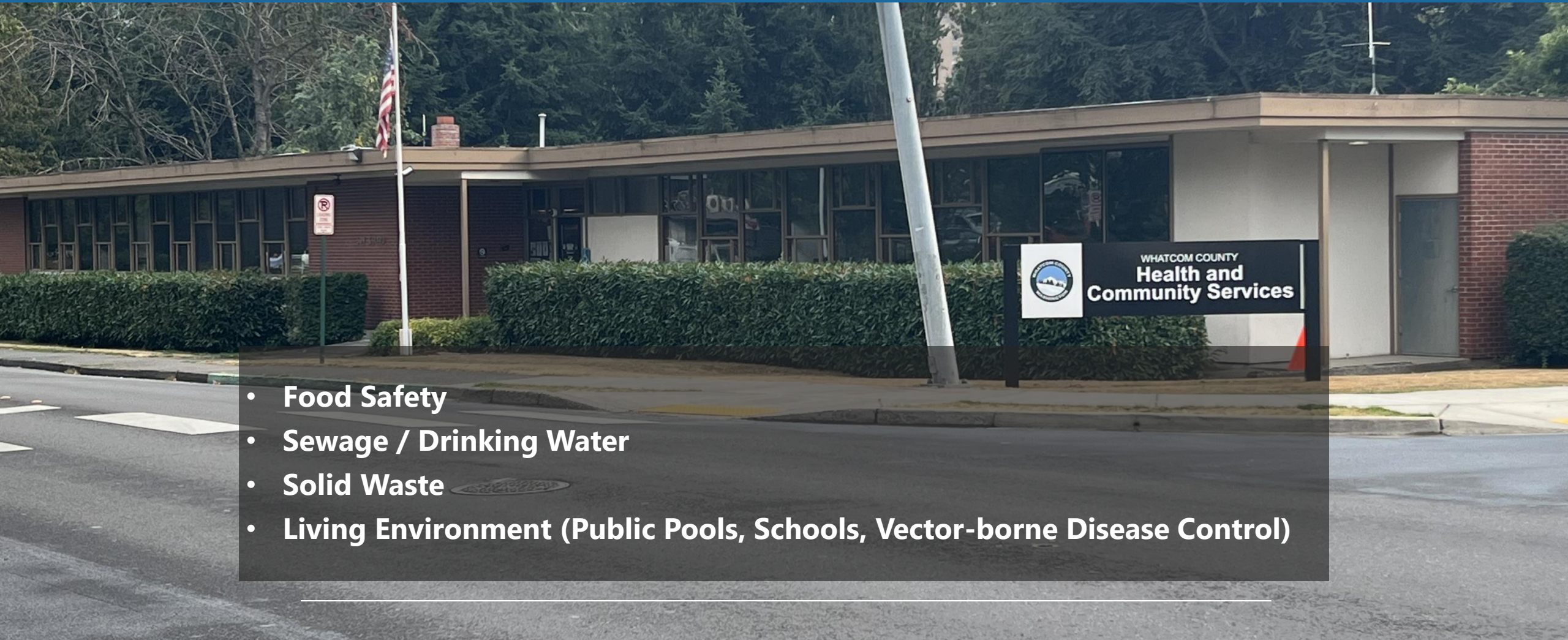


1974
EPA Safe
Drinking
Water Act



1993
FDA Model
Retail Food
Code

Environmental Public Health Programs Prevent Illness and Injury

- 
- A photograph of a single-story brick building with large windows, identified by a sign as the Whatcom County Health and Community Services building. The building is surrounded by greenery and a paved road. A sign in the foreground lists the services provided by the department.
- **Food Safety**
 - **Sewage / Drinking Water**
 - **Solid Waste**
 - **Living Environment (Public Pools, Schools, Vector-borne Disease Control)**

Food Safety



What are Two Things That All Whatcom County Residents Have in Common?

Food Safety



What are Two Things That All Whatcom County Residents Have in Common?

1. We all eat

Food Safety



What are Two Things That All Whatcom County Residents Have in Common?

1. We all eat
2. We all obtain food from Whatcom County food establishments

Whatcom County's Food Safety Program



8 Full-time Employees:

- 1 awesome clerk
- 6 specialists
- 1 supervisor



What Does the Food Safety Program Do?



Issue Food Establishment Permits

- About 1240 Permanent Establishments
- About 400 Temporary Establishments

What Does the Food Safety Program Do?



Issue Food Establishment Permits

- About 1240 Permanent Establishments
- About 400 Temporary Establishments

Inspect Food Establishments

What Does the Food Safety Program Do?



Issue Food Establishment Permits

- About 1240 Permanent Establishments
- About 400 Temporary Establishments

Inspect Food Establishments

Educate Food Workers

What Does the Food Safety Program Do?



Investigate Illness and Other Complaints

Respond to Illness Outbreaks with Help from our Communicable Disease Staff and our Health Officer

Verify Removal of Recalled Food Products

Challenges



Covid 19 and Inspection Staff Turnover Since January 2022

Timely response to new applications:

- Response time is usually 3-5 weeks
- Goal is 1-2 weeks

New Inspection and Permitting Database:

- Lots of staff time with software contractor
- Less time for inspection and project review work

Challenges



Separating Food Safety Myth from Fact:

- The last thing I ate made me sick

Challenges



Separating Food Safety Myth from Fact:

- The last thing I ate made me sick
- Mayonnaise must be refrigerated

Challenges



Separating Food Safety Myth from Fact:

- The last thing I ate made me sick
- Mayonnaise must be refrigerated
- Cooking kills all germs

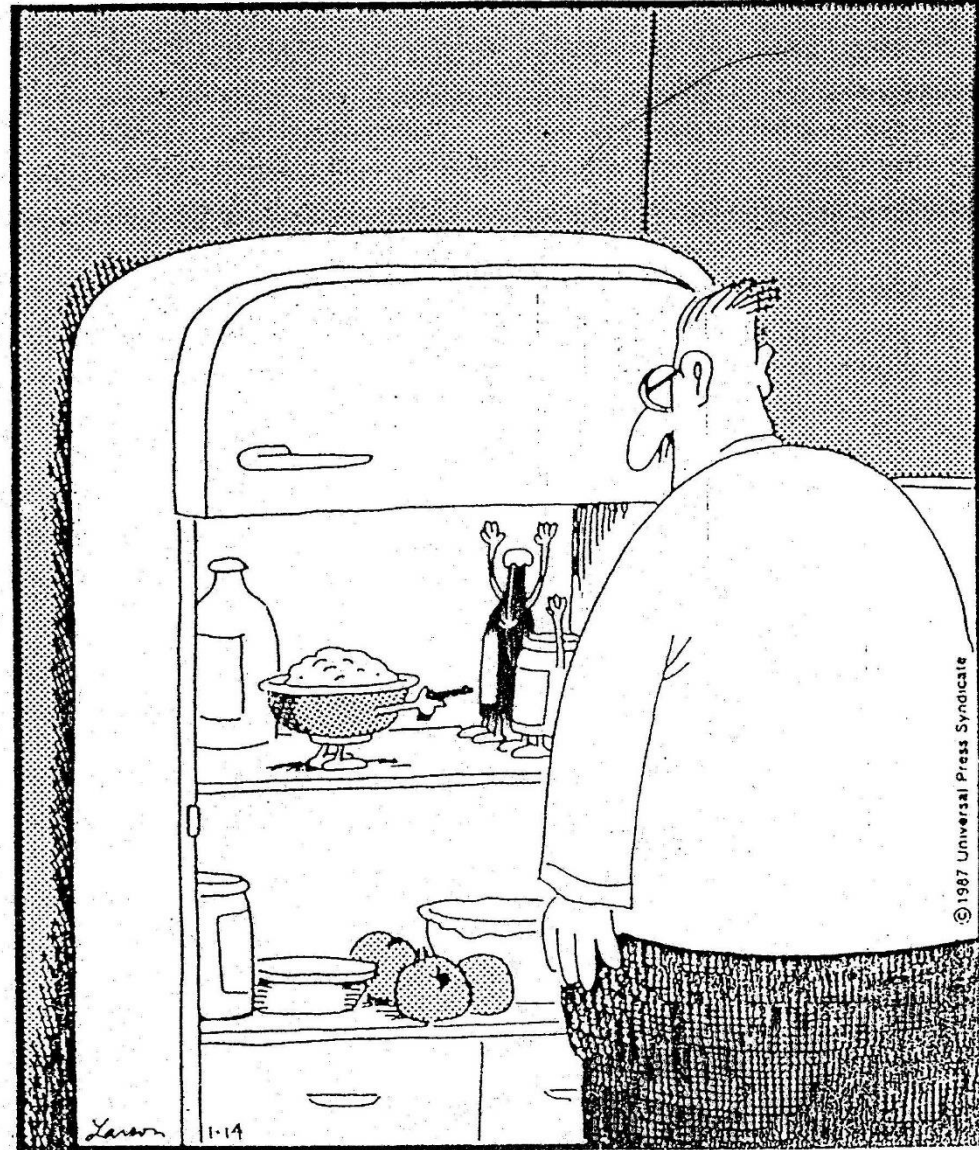
Challenges



Separating Food Safety Myth from Fact:

- The last thing I ate made me sick
- Mayonnaise must be refrigerated
- Cooking kills all germs
- The "5 second rule"

The Far Side



When potato salad goes bad

Challenges



Separating Food Safety Myth from Fact:

- The last thing I ate made me sick
- Mayonnaise must be refrigerated
- Cooking kills all germs
- The "5 second rule"
- Spoiled food is dangerous

Top 5 Causes of Foodborne Illness



1. Ill Food Workers – Stay Home if You Are Sick!

Top 5 Causes of Foodborne Illness



1. Ill Food Workers – Stay Home if You Are Sick!
2. Poor Hand Washing/Bare Hand Contact with Food – Wash Hands Before Preparing Food, After Using the restroom, After Handling Raw Meat, etc. Use Gloves or Utensils Instead of Bare Hands.

Top 5 Causes of Foodborne Illness



1. Ill Food Workers – Stay Home if You Are Sick!
2. Poor Hand Washing/Bare Hand Contact with Food – Wash Before Preparing Food, After Using the restroom, After Handling Raw meat, etc. Use Gloves or Utensils Instead of Bare Hands.
3. Temperature Control – Cooking, Hot holding, Cooling, Cold Holding

Top 5 Causes of Foodborne Illness



1. Ill Food Workers – Stay Home if You Are Sick!
2. Poor Hand Washing/Bare Hand Contact with Food – Wash Before Preparing Food, After Using the restroom, After Handling Raw meat, etc. Use Gloves or Utensils Instead of Bare Hands.
3. Temperature Control – Cooking, Hot holding, Cooling, Cold Holding
4. Contaminated Food Source – Raw Oysters, Raw Milk, Contamination during Production or Distribution

Top 5 Causes of Foodborne Illness



1. Ill Food Workers – Stay Home if You Are Sick!
2. Poor Hand Washing/Bare Hand Contact with Food – Wash Before Preparing Food, After Using the restroom, After Handling Raw meat, etc. Use Gloves or Utensils Instead of Bare Hands.
3. Temperature Control – Cooking, Hot holding, Cooling, Cold Holding
4. Contaminated Food Source – Raw Oysters, Raw Milk, Contamination during Production, or Distribution
5. Cross Contamination – Contamination During Preparation and Service

Challenges



Unpermitted Food Vendors

Outbreaks Never Occur at Convenient Times

Improving Inspection Results

Types of Food Establishments



- **Simple Menu:** Concession Stands, Hot Dog Carts, Coffee Stands
- **Moderate:** Fast Food, Meat/Seafood Markets
- **Complex:** Full Service Restaurants/Caterers – Foods Prepared from Scratch

Food Establishment Inspection Results



- **Approved** – No Food Safety Violations or Very Few
- **Follow Up Required** – Some Food Safety Violations
- **Reinspection Required** – Many Food Safety Violations
- **Permit Suspended** – Imminent Health Threat or Repeated Serious Food Safety Violations

Two Ways to Assess Inspection Results

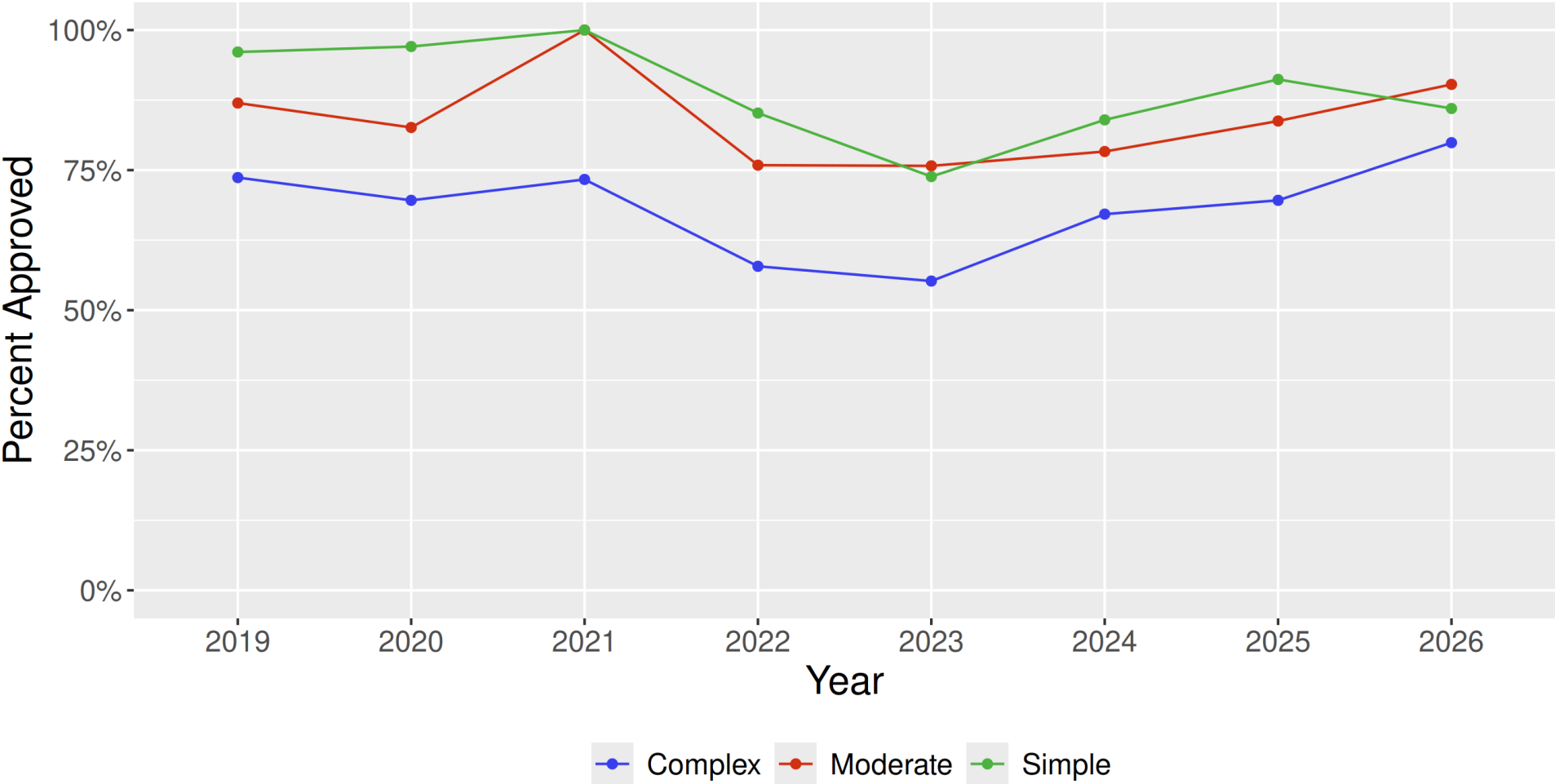


- By Menu Complexity
- By Operator English Fluency

Inspection Results by Risk Category

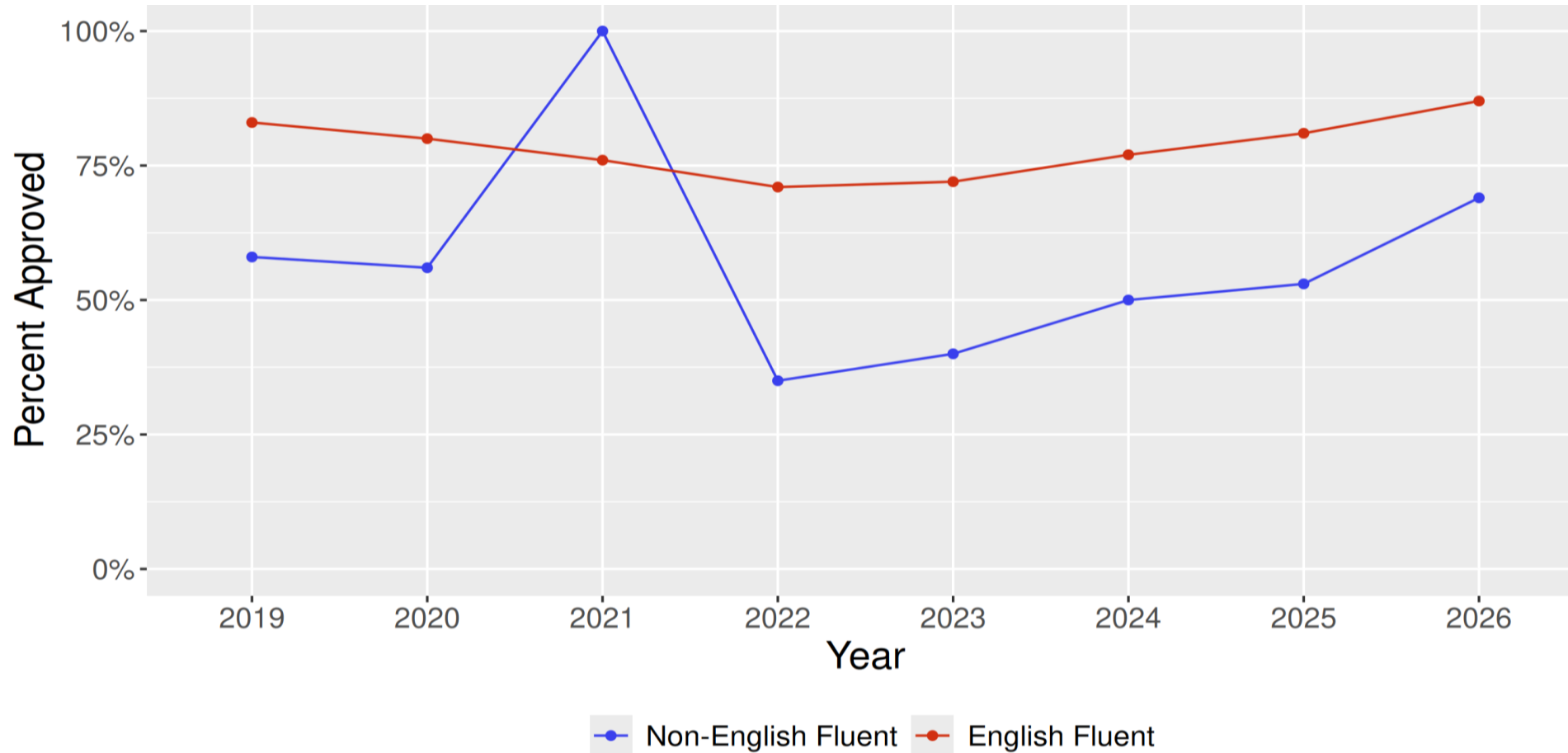


Inspection Results by Risk Category



Improved Inspection by English Fluency

Moderate and Complex Menu



Challenges



Reducing Language Barriers to Improve Inspection Outcomes

- Increasing the use of educational site visits and office meetings
- Increasing the use of interpreters
- Masters Candidate Assessing Effective Communication with Non-English Fluent Operators

Successes



Recently Hired Staff Are Fully Trained

Revised Inspection and Enforcement Strategies

Rapid Response to Unpermitted Food Vendors

Successes



Close collaboration with the Public Health Nurses in our Communicable Disease Division

Rapid Interview of Patients with Possible Foodborne Illnesses

Foodborne Illness Outbreak Response/Patient Testing

Close Collaboration with the Washington State Department of Health Food Safety Team

Successes



37 approved food donation programs.

"... Our **Nobody Goes Hungry** program now focuses entirely on producing 1 lb packs of dry stew mix: rice, beans, peas, chicken bouillon. They are tasty, shelf stable and welcomed by the local food banks and other hunger relief agencies. We've produced over 10,000 pounds, enough for 60,000 servings, and are looking to increase our capacity."

– Steve Gaber, Northwest Fruit Rescue, and Doug Robertson, Miracle Food Network

Trends



More and More Mobile Food Vendors:

- 111 permitted mobile food vendors
- 9% of all permanent establishments

Menus Evolve – Charcuterie, Craft Cocktails, Poke ...

More Convenience Stores and Bars Offering Prepared Food

Unpermitted “Pop Up” Vendors

Learn from the Past



1992 – Fast Food-related E.coli O157:H7 Outbreak

- Ground Beef Cooking Temperature Raised from 140° F to 155° F (now 158° F)

Learn from the Past



1992 – Fast Food-related E.coli O157:H7 Outbreak

- Ground Beef Cooking Temperature Raised from 140° F to 155° F (now 158° F)

1990's – Outbreaks of Salmonella Linked to Sprouts

- Sprouts now require refrigeration

Learn from the Past



1992 – Fast Food-related E.coli O157:H7 Outbreak

- Ground Beef Cooking Temperature Raised from 140° F to 155° F (now 158° F)

1990's – Outbreaks of Salmonella Linked to Sprouts

- Sprouts now require refrigeration

Late 1980s and early 1990s – Salmonella and E. Coli Outbreaks linked to cut melons

- Cut melons now require refrigeration

Learn from the Past



1990s-early 2000s – Listeria Causes Several Outbreaks with Deaths

- Refrigeration Temperature Reduced from 45° F to 41° F
- Limit Shelf Life of Foods that are Hospitable to Listeria

Learn from the Past



1990s-early 2000s – Listeria Causes Several Outbreaks with Deaths

- Refrigeration Temperature Reduced from 45° F to 41° F
- Limit Shelf Life of Foods that are Hospitable to Listeria

2026 - Cyclospora

- ????

Is the Past Linked to the Present and the Future?



- “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it”
 - George Santayana - 1905
- Public Health Assures that We do not Forget the Lessons of the Past.

Look to the Future



Monitor Food Safety Trends – Learn from Our History

Improve Communication with Food Establishment Operators, Especially Those Who are not English Fluent

We are Working with a Graduate Student Work to Assess Communication Barriers with Spanish Speaking Operators and Food Workers

How do We Improve Produce Safety?

How to Contact the Food Safety Program



- Call Us: 360-778-6000
- E-mail: hl_foodsafetyprogram@co.whatcom.wa.us
hl_environmentalhealth@co.whatcom.wa.us
- Ask a Question/File a Complaint from Our Web Page
- File a Complaint via FINS (Foodborne Illness Notification System):
<https://doh.wa.gov/you-and-your-family/illness-and-disease-z/foodborne-illness>

Thank you

Tom Kunesh, RS

Whatcom County Health and Community Services

Food Safety Program Supervisor

August 4, 2026