



Safe Food for a Healthy Life

An Initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University

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SURVEY OF STATE HEALTH DEPARTMENTS UNDERSCORES GAPS IN FOODBORNE ILLNESS RESPONSE

**Produce Safety Project and Safe Tables Our Priority survey demonstrates need
for better integration and collection of outbreak data**

Washington DC – A survey of state health departments regarding their capacity to track produce-related foodborne illnesses found that the response and investigation of outbreaks varies greatly and can lead to delays in public-health response.

The survey was commissioned by the Produce Safety Project (PSP), an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University, and conducted by Safe Tables Our Priority (S.T.O.P.). Thirty-nine of the 51 state and District of Columbia health departments responded to the survey, which asked about the types of questions and questionnaires administered to victims of foodborne illness, the time frame in which they were completed, and how states collected and stored the resulting data for calendar year 2007.

Despite the increase in the number of multi-state outbreaks of illnesses linked to fresh produce over the past several years, the data show that only 25 of the 39 states responding to the PSP/S.T.O.P. survey asked victims about specific produce items – even if the item was associated with a past outbreak.

“It is important to learn from our experience, and so it is surprising that many states are failing to ask about fruits and vegetables on their questionnaires given to foodborne illness victims,” said Jim O’Hara, PSP director.

“The lack of food attribution data and especially attribution to produce is astounding considering the large burden of foodborne illness in the U.S.,” said Donna Rosenbaum, the Executive Director of S.T.O.P. “And it all starts with finding out what the person ate. The public health system cannot find what it’s not looking

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for or asking about. We certainly cannot fix the food safety system when we don't know exactly where and how the contaminated produce makes it into the marketplace and onto consumers' plates.

Nearly 60% (23 out of 39) of the responding states indicate that they are unable to electronically link their investigative data for analysis. An improved food safety system would include data from multiple sources in a single system that investigators can analyze quickly and efficiently.

"A critical step in improving our food safety system is better coordination on the types of information collected and better integration of that data at the state and local level," O'Hara said.

"There are important lessons learned in the data we collected which can lead to best practices being adopted, and ultimately to lives saved," Rosenbaum added.

For a copy of the executive summary and survey, visit producesafetyproject.org.

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About the Produce Safety Project (PSP):

The Produce Safety Project at Georgetown University, an initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts, seeks the establishment by the Food and Drug Administration of mandatory and enforceable safety standards for domestic and imported fresh produce, from farm to fork. Our families need to have confidence that federal food safety regulation is based on prevention, scientifically sound risk assessment and management, and coordinated integrated data collection. For more information online, visit www.producesafetyproject.org.

About Safe Tables Our Priority, Inc. (S.T.O.P.):

S.T.O.P. - Safe Tables Our Priority is a national, nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens. In 2009, S.T.O.P. will achieve its mission by advocating changes in public policy, educating and doing outreach, providing victim assistance, and formalizing a victims of foodborne illness registry in order to study the long-term consequences of foodborne disease. S.T.O.P. has been supporting families who have suffered from foodborne diseases nationwide since the Jack in the Box outbreak of 1993. For more information, visit www.safetables.org.