During today’s session:

- Introductions
- Communicating during foodborne outbreaks
- Five common outbreak communication scenarios
- Deciding when, what, and how to communicate
- Strategies for interacting with the media
- Improving collaboration among partners
Introductions
• **Dr. Kathleen Gensheimer**
  - Chief Medical Officer/Outbreak Director, Coordinated Outbreak Response and Evaluation (CORE) Network

• **Primary Role:**
  - Overall responsibility for leadership and management of FDA's activities related to incidents of illness linked to human and animal food

• **Other Role:**
  - Serves as spokesperson during outbreaks
Aaron Lavallee
- Deputy Assistant Administrator
- Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education

Primary Role
- Responsible for planning and executing communication programs that inform and educate a variety of audiences on FSIS policy and public health responsibilities and activities, foodborne illness prevention, and safe food handling.

Gabrielle Johnston, MPH
- Public Affairs Specialist
- Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education

Primary Role
- Manage communications surrounding illness investigations including recalls, public health alerts, and media inquires

Other Roles
- Collaborate with federal/state food safety partners on preventative health messaging
Laura Burnworth, MPH
- Health Communication Specialist
- Outbreak Response and Prevention Branch

Primary role at CDC:
- Facilitate public communication for enteric outbreak investigations

Other roles:
- Assist state and local health departments with public communications
- Develop preventative health messages
Communicating during Outbreaks
Why do we communicate about a foodborne outbreak?

- **Specific** food identified
- Public can take **action** to protect themselves
- **Effective** risk communication
Why do we communicate about a foodborne outbreak?

Other reasons may include:

- Cases increasing rapidly (ongoing outbreak)
- High-risk group involved
- Deaths, high hospitalization rate
- Pathogen severity is high
- High media interest
- Misinformation being circulated
- Political pressure
What evidence do we use to decide to communicate?

Evidence we evaluate includes a combination of:

> Epidemiologic
> Traceback
> Laboratory
Evidence gathered during an investigation supports not just communication efforts, but also regulatory action.

In some situations, communication is based on epidemiologic evidence alone.

Regulatory action ideally requires a combination of traceback and/or laboratory with epidemiologic evidence.
Five Common Communication Scenarios
Scenario 1
- Cluster of illnesses with no specific source identified

Scenario 2
- Generic food type identified as likely vehicle

Scenario 3
- Specific food product, brand identified as likely vehicle

Scenario 4
- Local outbreak, locals and/or state release press

Scenario 5
- Pathogen identified in food independent of any human illness

Examples:
- 20 people infected with one strain of *E. coli* in 5 states

- Epi signal for ground beef

- Brand X ground beef is likely vehicle

- Outbreak of *E. coli* infections in Ohio

- Ground beef recalled for *E. coli* contamination
Outbreak of Listeriosis – November 2014

- How many people are sick? Where?
  - 22 people in 10 states

- How severe are the illnesses?
  - 1 death, 3 invasive illnesses in healthy children

- Has a food vehicle been identified?
  - No
  - Items of interest include:
    - Hot dogs
    - Strawberries
    - Ice cream
    - Asian buffets
    - Wal-Mart shoppers
## Outbreak of Listeriosis – November 2014

### Scenario 1
- Cluster of illnesses with no specific source identified - 22 cases of listeriosis in 10 states

### Scenario 2
- Generic food type identified as likely vehicle

### Scenario 3
- Specific food product, brand identified as likely vehicle

### Scenario 4
- Local outbreak, locals and/or state release press

### Scenario 5
- Pathogen identified in food independent of any human illness
Reasons to **NOT** Communicate

- Can the public take specific actions to protect themselves?
  - No, no food vehicle identified

- Is the food vehicle generic in nature?
  - Unsure, no food vehicle identified

- Is there sufficient evidence for what the source is?
  - No

- Is the outbreak over?
  - No, cases continue to be reported to PulseNet

- Could communicating create message fatigue?
  - Yes
Reasons to Communicate

- Is the pathogen causing severe illness?
  - Yes, death and invasive disease

- Are there a large number of cases?
  - Yes, for *Listeria*

- Is the outbreak ongoing?
  - Yes, cases continue to be reported to PulseNet

- Is the food vehicle novel?
  - Unknown

- Does the product have a long shelf life?
  - Unknown

- Is a large group of people potentially exposed?
  - Unknown

- Can the public take specific actions to protect themselves?
  - No, no food vehicle identified
At this point in the investigation, should we communicate to the public about this outbreak?
Decision: Wait for More Info

- Public health officials chose not to communicate at this point because a common food item consumed by ill people had not been identified
  - No action step for the public to take to protect themselves

- The investigation continued to gather more information
Outbreak of Listeriosis – December 2014

- How many people are sick? Where?
  - 28 people in 10 states

- How severe are the illnesses?
  - 5 deaths, 3 invasive illnesses in healthy children

- Has a food vehicle been identified?
  - 83% reported eating prepackaged caramel apples
  - No single brand in common
Outbreak of Listeriosis – December 2014

Scenario 1
• Cluster of illnesses with no specific source identified

Scenario 2
• Generic food type identified as likely vehicle - Commercial Caramel Apples

Scenario 3
• Specific food product, brand identified as likely vehicle

Scenario 4
• Local outbreak, locals and/or state release press

Scenario 5
• Pathogen identified in food independent of any human illness
Reasons to **NOT** Communicate

- Is there a clear action step for the public?
  - Yes, avoid all commercial caramel apples until further notice

- Is the food vehicle generic in nature?
  - No specific brand, but food product is unique and easy to identify

- Is there sufficient evidence?
  - Unsure (strong epidemiologic data)

- Is the outbreak over?
  - No, cases continue to be reported to PulseNet

- Could communicating create message fatigue?
  - No
Reasons to Communicate

- Is the pathogen causing severe illness?
  - Yes, death and invasive disease

- Is there a large number of cases?
  - Yes, for *Listeria*

- Is the outbreak ongoing?
  - Yes, cases continue to be reported to PulseNet

- Is the food vehicle novel?
  - Yes

- Does the product have a long shelf life?
  - Yes

- Is a large group of people potentially exposed?
  - Yes, commercial product available in many large grocery chains

- Can the public take specific actions to protect themselves?
  - Yes
At this point in the investigation, should we communicate to the public about this outbreak?
Decision: Time to Communicate

- To prevent additional illnesses, public health officials felt it was important to communicate even though a **specific brand** of caramel apples had not yet been identified by traceback or product testing.

- Although “caramel apples” is a generic food product, officials were able to specify the type of product:
  - Commercially produced
  - Pre-packaged
  - Not homemade
Action Taken

Consumer Warning (December 19, 2014):

“The information CDC has at this time indicates that commercially produced, prepackaged caramel apples may be contaminated with *Listeria*. *Listeria* can cause a serious, life-threatening illness.

Out of an abundance of caution, CDC recommends that U.S. consumers not eat any commercially produced, prepackaged caramel apples, including plain caramel apples as well as those containing nuts, sprinkles, chocolate, or other toppings, until more specific guidance can be provided.

At this time, no illnesses related to this outbreak have been linked to apples that are not caramel-coated and not prepackaged or to caramel candy.

There is no evidence currently linking illnesses to homemade caramel apples. If you are unsure if a caramel apple is commercially produced or homemade, then you should not eat it.”
Summary

- Communication to the public may be needed at any point, or it may never be needed
  - Officials must continuously evaluate the need for communication
- The decision about “when” to communicate typically occurs quickly
  - New information can trigger communication at any point in an investigation
- Increasing demands for government to be transparent
- Our Challenge: Be “Fast and Right”
- Remember: Communication is iterative
Group Breakouts
**Scenario 1**
- Cluster of illnesses with no specific source identified

**Scenario 2**
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**Examples:**
- 20 people infected with one strain of *E. coli* in 5 states
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Interacting with the Media
Preparing for “Difficult to Answer” Questions

Mass media requires conflict and drama

A story without drama won’t be published

Be prepared with this in mind
Media Can Deliver Our Message

- **Tips for successful media engagement:**
  - Prepare beforehand
  - Consider everything is *on the record*
  - Small words and short sentences
  - If you don’t know, say so; don’t speculate

- **Keep the focus on your message:**
  - Here’s what we know
  - Here’s how we know it
  - Here’s what we don’t know
  - Here’s what we’re doing to find out
  - Here’s what you can do to protect yourself
Preparing for “Difficult to Answer” Questions

“Is food X safe to eat?”

“Why didn’t you act sooner?”

“What do you have to say to the families affected?”

“Why hasn’t there been a recall?”

“Do you expect to see additional illnesses?”

“Is there anything you’d like to mention that we didn’t discuss?”
Interview Examples

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMgARVsDsnc


Improving Collaboration
Acknowledging the Landscape

Consumers

Industry

Government
Acknowledging the Landscape

- One thing in common - Public Health
- Roles and responsibilities
- Expectations

Discord Conflicting Info + Media = Negative public opinion
Lessons Learned from FSIS Pilot

- 3-tiers: National, State, Local
  - Turf - “Not us, call them”
  - Cooperative Extension

- Social Media - the lowest hanging fruit
  - Facebook and Twitter - reposts

- Other opportunities:
  - WIC
  - School Districts
Wrap-up and Q&A
Communication Challenges during Foodborne Outbreaks

InFORM Conference
Phoenix, Arizona
November 19, 2015

More Questions? Email Laura Burnworth - wmg5@cdc.gov