

# **CRISIS EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION**

## **Best Practices**

### **Taco Bell *E. coli* Outbreak**

#### **Background**

*E. coli*, a food borne gastrointestinal illness can be a highly dangerous public health risk – especially to the elderly, the young, and those with compromised immune systems. When the *E. coli* outbreak occurred, the state faced many challenges including:

- Allaying concerns of the public
- Taking steps to mitigate and contain any short- or long-term risks associated with the outbreak
- Providing timely and accurate information on steps the public should take

The state health department implemented its existing risk communications plan to address the situation.

#### **Media Coverage**

A local NJ health department released information to the newspaper that 11 people has been exposed to *E. coli*. No prior notification given to the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS). The media identified the source of the disease as Taco Bell restaurants. Concern among the public who frequented the food chain grew rapidly quickly

#### **Activated Risk Communications Plan**

- Appropriate DHSS staff were assigned responsibility to manage message content and delivery, and liaise with internal and external partners
- DHSS public health messages were consistent and delivered in a timely manner
- News media was closely monitored for message accuracy
- Misinformation was quickly addressed
- A Public Information Officer (PIO) was assigned to create messages for press releases, talking points
- Maintain ongoing communications with local health agencies and health care providers through the NJ Health Alert Network,
- Handle media calls
- Handle non *E. coli* press calls
- Attend daily Communicable Disease Service meetings for situation and messages updates
- DHSS Director of Communications kept the Governor's office and key state officials apprised daily

#### **Message Content and Delivery**

Messages were developed after meeting with the Communicable Disease Service

Message content incorporated:

- Status of the investigation
- Confirmed, suspected and probable cases
- Description of *E. coli* symptoms, treatment and prevalence

Press Conference scheduled for first day (Monday, December 4). All DHSS Communication staff were briefed twice daily on talking points, situational awareness and communication and epidemiological updates. All press releases and fact sheets were available on the Department's web site.

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## **Risk Communications Outputs**

- 11 Press releases were distributed
- A press conference was held with the Commissioner and the Deputy State Epidemiologist
- The communications staff responded to 15 -20 press calls per day between December 4-13 with 50 calls on December 6
- Four sets of talking points were developed for distribution to DHSS leadership and local health departments
- On December 6th, the Communications Office issued two corrections of inaccurate information, which had been generated at the local health departments

## **Correcting Erroneous Information**

### *NJDHSS Order*

- Remove and dispose of all food from the Taco Bell restaurants in NJ
- Clean and sanitize the restaurants
- Restock the restaurants
- Taco Bell facilities associated with the outbreak had to test all workers and provide enhanced training in food safety and preparation

### *Media Coverage*

- One newspaper published in an article in an on-line edition that NJ had ordered all Taco Bell restaurants to close
- A NY based, regional all news radio station, used the on-line source for its 3:00 pm newscast

### *Risk Communications Principles*

- The on-line source was contacted and the inaccurate information was taken down from the website
- The radio station was contacted and the information was corrected for the 3:30 pm newscast