



NEWS RELEASE

May 25, 2017

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## **Health Inspectors Warn Restaurants of Phony Food Inspector Scam and Door-to-Door Meat Sales**

Public Health Inspectors would like to alert Cerro Gordo County residents of a scam that is being seen in Scott County and Central Iowa. The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA) received reports of a fake food inspectors presenting in Iowa restaurants, primarily ethnic restaurants.

The latest scam involves an individual posing as a good inspector who promises the restaurant owner a quicker renewal of their food license in exchange for a \$5 payment by credit card. This scam first appeared in Iowa several years ago when individuals posing as health department officials would bully restaurant owners and staff in attempts to obtain personal information including cell phone numbers, social security numbers, and cash.

“If you do not see the health inspector in a Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health vehicle with appropriate signage, you do not recognize the so-called inspector at your restaurant, or the inspector is unable to give you an official business card, please call us right away,” said Brian Hanft, Environmental Health Service Manager with the Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health. “Do not give out any information until you have confirmed it is an official with our Department.”

A legitimate restaurant inspector will never ask an establishment owner or staff for personal information, will never threaten or intimidate a restaurant employee, and will never attempt to extort money in exchange for fixing a problem. They are there to educate and assist the establishment in their operations.

Restaurant owners and operators are urged to contact the Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health or the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals for verification of a person’s identity if they have any doubts about an inspector.

This is also a great reminder to residents about the potential dangers of purchasing meat from door-to-door sales people who operate without a valid license.

The Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health inspects and licenses food service establishments, food establishments, temporary food facilities, and mobile food units.

“We have had reports of operators selling meat door-to-door, which is legal so long as the appropriate licensure is obtained” said Hanft. “Before you purchase anything, ask to see their license to sell food. If you are still unsure of their credibility, call our Department with any questions. They can wait a few minutes.”

The next time your doorbell rings, remember the following USDA recommendations before you purchase meat at your home:

- **Ask to see a state license.** In Iowa, salespersons are required to have a valid Iowa state mobile food license to sell food products door-to-door. Ask to see the salesperson's license to sell. The license assures customers that the company and its vehicles have been inspected and approved for food sales.
- **Ask for a brochure.** Reputable companies will have a local sales office with a published price list that includes the address and phone number of the company.
- **Read the label on the package or carton before you buy. Insist on having the establishment number where the meat or poultry was inspected.** USDA and state inspected products are required to give information about the product on the label, including the species, the cut, net weight, ingredients statement and the safe handling statement. Beware of any dealer who wants you to purchase bulk quantities of meat and poultry that are not properly labeled. Always ask the dealer to leave the box or labeling information if individual products are not labeled.
- **Always check to be sure the product has been carried in a refrigerated vehicle.** Never buy meat or poultry products that are carried in an un-refrigerated truck or car trunk. The product may be unsafe because bacteria that cause illness multiply rapidly above 40 degrees.
- **If you change your mind.** The Federal Trade Commission Cooling-Off Rule gives you three days to cancel purchases that are made in your home or at a location that is not the permanent place of business or local address of the seller. The Cooling-Off Rule does not cover sales of \$25 or under. Under the rule, **the salesperson must orally inform you of your cancellation rights at the time of sale.** You also must be given two copies of a cancellation form and a copy of your contract or receipt. The contract or receipt should be dated, show the name and address of the seller, and explain your right to cancel. The contract or receipt must be in the same language used in the sales presentation.
- **You have three days to cancel your sale.** Also remember that using a charge card does not guarantee a refund. To cancel a sale, sign and date one copy of the cancellation form. Make sure the envelope is postmarked before midnight of the third business day after the contract date. Saturday is considered a business day, but Sunday and Federal holidays are not. Because proof of the mailing date and receipt are important, consider sending the cancellation form by certified mail. Keep the other copy of the cancellation form for your records.
- **If you have a complaint about the company.** Try to resolve your dispute with the seller first. Make sure you act quickly. Send a letter of complaint. A letter is important because it puts your complaint on record and lets the company know you are serious about pursuing the dispute. Be sure you keep a copy for your records.
- In general, **beware of claims that are too good to be true. They usually are.**

#### **For Additional Help:**

- Check with the Cerro Gordo County Department of Public Health to see if the company is licensed.

- If you encounter "bait and switch" practices, contact your local or state Consumer Protection Office.
- Call your local Better Business Bureau to help you establish if you are doing business with a reputable firm or if complaints have been filed against the firm or individual.

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