

## **Yes, you do need a food establishment permit!**

By Elizabeth Kizer, Health Director

As the summer heat rises, so do the number of public summer activities. Apache County Public Health Services District is tasked with ensuring that food served to the public is safe and prepared in accordance with the food code. There are a number of seasonal, temporary events in which food is being served and often vendors don't realize that they do need to obtain a permit in order to serve that food to the public.

There are very few instances in which a permit is not necessary. Un-cut fruits and vegetables can be sold without a permit (like at a Farmer's Market). Non-profit agencies (such as churches or charitable organizations) can hold infrequent bake sales as long as they follow two simple rules:

1. the items sold do not need to be refrigerated or heated (such as breads, brownies, or cookies)
2. the agency places a placard in public view stating that the food is prepared in a non-licensed kitchen and is not inspected by the Public Health office.

In pretty much every other situation, if food is being prepared for the public, it must be licensed. Why? Because we want our food sellers to maintain sanitary facilities, practices, and hands in order to reduce the spread of viruses and bacteria harmful to humans.

There are over 250 different food borne illnesses and 76 million cases of food borne illness are reported each year in the US! Approximately 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths each year are attributed to food borne illness. You may have heard of some of these illnesses... salmonella is widespread in poultry and is commonly active when chicken is not cooked to 165 degrees. E. coli generally is found in beef and it most commonly transmitted in hamburgers that are not cooked thoroughly to 165 degrees. Many food borne illnesses can be life-threatening, especially if your immune system is already weakened. People receiving chemotherapy treatment, pregnant women, the elderly and the very young are some of those groups considered "vulnerable populations." Vulnerable populations are at a higher risk of being severely affected by food borne illnesses because their immune systems are compromised.

How does a license help reduce the spread of food borne illnesses? Public Health professionals, who have obtained a state credential as a Registered Sanitarian, work with food vendors to assure that their processes are in compliance with the food code. Sanitarians, also called health inspectors, look at many things in a food establishment. Things health inspectors look for include:

- the types of equipment used to make the food,
- that the equipment is being properly and regularly cleaned,
- to make sure cross-contamination between meat and other foods does not occur,
- that food workers wash their hands frequently and especially after using the bathroom,
- that food is cooked to the proper temperatures,

- that reheated food, chicken and hamburger are cooked to 165 degrees
- that cold food is held below 41 degrees (to prevent bacteria growth)
- that hot food is held above 140 degrees (to prevent bacteria growth)
- that cold food is properly stored and labeled in the refrigerator

If food vendors are improperly handling food in any way health inspectors work with them to correct the problems. This is why the vast majority of food we buy from grocery stores, restaurants, and temporary vendors is safe for both the general population and vulnerable populations.

As a consumer, you have the right to ask to see a food vendor's food establishment license. In fact, I would encourage you to do so! All food vendors in Apache County are issued a permit. The permit should have "Apache County Public Health Services District" printed across the top of it and below that, in bold letters, is the establishment's permit number. Under the permit number the permit holder and business name should be visible. The final pieces of information contained on the permit are the effective dates of the permit as well as an official signature from our office. If a food vendor cannot produce a permit, you can call our office at 928-337-7607 to see if they are properly licensed, or to report a vendor operating without a permit.