

Health Services Agency Environmental Health Services Department

Background

Environmental Health Services Department's role is to enhance the quality of environmental life in Riverside County. The department's programs are divided into four divisions: Animal Control, District Environmental Services, Hazardous Materials Management and Environmental Resources Management.

This report will refer to Retail Food Protection and Public Swimming Area Safety which includes the design, construction, operation and maintenance of public swimming pools under the District Environmental Services Division. Also covered in this report will be emergency response to hazardous material incidents under the Hazardous Material Management Division.

The Retail Food program protects the populace from improper food handling and ensures proper sanitation practices. With more than 9,200 retail food facilities within Riverside County, this program oversees restaurants, markets, bakeries, produce stands, snack bars, public and private schools, food vehicles and carts, fairs and carnivals, bed and breakfast facilities, vending machines, commissaries and caterers. This program also administers food handlers' certification in the county and in cities that require the certification. The funding for this program is 100 percent permit-supported.

The Public Swimming Area Safety program sets forth the requirements for a healthy and safe environment at public swimming facilities. It also ensures enforcement of all state and local regulations in recreational bathing places to reduce any incident of disease, injury or death. There are more than 6,400 public swimming pools, spas and water parks that Environmental Health Specialists oversee to ensure safety and proper sanitation. This program is 100 percent fee-supported, and inspections are done twice per year.

The Hazardous Waste Material (HAZMAT) program includes emergency response to hazardous waste spills, detection and enforcement of hazardous waste regulations. Two of the hazardous wastes trained specialists from the Environmental Health Services Division serve on the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection HAZMAT team.

Findings

1. Minimum training and testing are provided for all food handlers. Restaurant workers are not tested for communicable diseases such as tuberculosis or Hepatitis A.

2. Riverside County and the State of California require pool fencing around the immediate pool area as specified in California Code of Regulations Section 2-9024, Title 24. This code has been subject to many interpretations. Some properties do not provide for the limited access and protection of children. Both the pool owners and county may be liable if accidents or drowning result from noncompliance and lack of enforcement.

3. Hazardous Materials Management Division states they face new challenges every day due to county growth and rapid urbanization, causing a multitude of environmental health problems, i.e., disposal of solid and liquid waste, water pollution, food contaminates and storage and handling of hazardous materials. They are also a part of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Emergency Response HAZMAT team.

4. District Environmental Services Division has numerous brochures with information regarding environmental health that are available for public use. However, these brochures are not easily accessible to the general public.

Recommendations

Environmental Health Services Department:

1. Provide more extensive training for all food handlers and screen all applicants for restaurant employment for any and all communicable diseases. Restaurant workers to be tested twice each year for any communicable diseases at either the employer's or employee's expense.

2. Assign qualified and trained personnel from the agency to inform developers and homeowners' associations of the correct interpretation of California Code of Regulations, Section 2-9024, Title 24. Many of these organizations do not understand, and therefore ignore, the safety purpose of the code. This should be followed up by a community awareness campaign and enforcement for compliance with the state code.

3. Remove HAZMAT team members from the involvement of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Emergency Response Team and expand their responsibilities into planning and research for HAZMAT prevention. This should include comprehensive studies and definitive plans for the abatement of all environmental health dangers.

4. Make the informational brochures more available to the general public through distribution in public places, i.e., libraries, supermarkets and health fairs.