Iowa Department of INSPECTIONS & APPEALS

DIA temporarily suspends food inspections during COVID-19 response

Department encourages online application and renewal of food licenses, waives late fees

DES MOINES — Effective immediately and until further notice, the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA), will temporarily suspend all routine inspections of hotels, home bakeries, and food establishments, including restaurants, bars, and food trucks.

DIA Food and Consumer Safety Bureau staff will limit inspections to those for complaints, follow-up inspections, and pre-opening inspections for new businesses.

Additionally, the department will temporarily cease inspections of food processing plants. DIA is under contract with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to complete these types of inspections. Earlier today, the FDA issued an order to DIA to discontinue conducting contract food manufacturer inspections.

Businesses that need to apply for or renew their food licenses are encouraged to do so online (licenses that are more than 60 days past due cannot be renewed online). The department will waive late fees for those businesses that are currently outstanding for the length of the governor's disaster proclamation, and for an unspecified amount of time during the recovery phase. However, late fees that have already been submitted will not be refunded.

Previous Actions

On Tuesday, the department issued a memo to all current food establishment license holders, notifying them of the action taken by Governor Reynolds to close all bars and limiting restaurant service to drive-through, carry-out, and delivery only until 11:59 p.m. on March 31.

The department issued a memo in conjunction with the Iowa Department of Public Health with recommendations for restaurants that planned to remain open with the limited service. Those recommendations include:

- Closely monitor food workers for signs of illness and send ill workers home immediately. Ill food workers should stay home for at least seven days after they begin exhibiting symptoms AND three days after fever and other symptoms stop.
- Immediately implement flexible leave policies and educate all food workers to stay home while they are ill. Do not require health care provider notes for food workers to return to work.
- Closely monitor food employee hand-washing and hygiene practices.
- Increase cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfection frequencies for all areas of the establishment, especially high-contact surfaces such as door handles, tables, chairs, and restroom fixtures.
- Ensure disinfecting and sanitizing agents are effective for COVID-19.

Frequently-Asked Questions

Q: Can customers wait inside a restaurant while food is prepared for carry-out?

A: DIA advises against this practice, and recommends delivery and curbside "carry-out" service only. DIA also recommends promoting phone and online ordering.

Q: Can convenience stores sell unpackaged carry-out food? (e.g. hot dogs, pizza slices)

A: DIA advises against this practice and encourages selling food that has been wrapped or placed in individual containers only.

Q: Can hotels remain open and serve food?

A: Yes. Dining areas must be closed but hotels may provide curbside, delivery, or room service. Self-service of unpackaged foods in kitchenette-like areas is discouraged.

Q: Can a nonprofit provide food to families in need without a license?

A: Based on current policy, if there is no cost to the consumer, a nonprofit may provide meals made on the premises (e.g. a church kitchen) free of charge to anyone in need without obtaining a food establishment license. On-premises dining is not advised. Curbside and delivery are encouraged.

Q: Can a restaurant cater to a business/office?

A: A caterer may deliver food, however, we recommend that catered food be packaged or placed in containers for individuals, and not offered as self-service or buffet-style. DIA also recommends the business is able to ensure employees are able to eat their meals while practicing social distancing (at least six feet between individuals). If necessary, encourage eating in shifts.

Q: Are company employee cafeterias required to close or eliminate dining room seating?

A: DIA advises any employees eating in a workplace cafeteria to practice social distancing while eating. Food should be placed in individual containers, and the employer should be able to ensure that employees and other diners are able to eat meals while practicing social distancing. DIA encourages employees to dine in shifts, or take food back to their work stations.

Q: Are hospital and assisted living cafeterias and dining areas required to close or eliminate dining room seating?

A: DIA advises against self-service or buffet-style dining. Food should be placed in individual containers, and the facility should be able to ensure that residents and other diners are able to eat meals while practicing social distancing. DIA encourages residents to dine in shifts, or have food delivered to their rooms.

Q: As we see supplies in grocery stores decline, if restaurants have excess food supplies due to only being open for drive-through or carry-out, are they allowed to sell food items like eggs and produce instead of prepared meals?

A: Restaurants may sell these items under a food service establishment license up to $20,000 annually. If the restaurant also holds a retail food establishment license, there is not a sales cap.

Visit the DIA Novel Coronavirus web page for additional information from the department. Iowans who wish to learn more about Novel Coronavirus and how to prevent the spread of the virus should visit the Iowa Department of Public Health's website.

The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals is committed to protecting the health and safety of Iowans through regulation and oversight of health care, food, and gaming; application of administrative law; and investigation of Medicaid and welfare fraud.

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