

## Catering Tips

Whether you volunteer, are drafted, or your job includes party planning, this year's company party is your responsibility. You call a caterer to help. Not only should you be concerned about the cost of the party, you need to quiz the caterer about FOOD SAFETY principles. Why? Because food that is not prepared properly, transported properly and served properly can lead to food borne illnesses - not a happy ending to a party. Here are the questions (and the answers) for you:

### **Q: Does the catering company have a permit or license?**

*A: Catering companies are considered food service establishments and must be licensed as a food establishment. This means that the local Health Department permits them and is inspected at least twice a year by the department inspector. Chances are that they are aware of the food safety rules and regulations.*

*Companies or individuals who prepare food only in clients' home or other setting is not regulated because they do not have a facility where they prepare food for catering. These operators may not be aware of all safe food handling principles. You can check to see if they are certified food handlers, who has taken the food safety course offered by many local health departments. Various professional associations also offer similar food safety courses.*

### **Q: Where is the food cooked?**

*A: If the food preparation is to take place at the caterer's establishment, feel free to visit the facility. The facility must be clean, provided with enough refrigeration space for large quantities of food, cooking and holding facility for large batches of cooking so that cooking will not need to be done too far in advance. There should be separate areas in the kitchen for handling raw and cooked products as when raw and cooked products mix, cross contamination can cause an illness outbreak. Check to see if the employees in the kitchen follow good hygienic practices by washing hands frequently.*

### **Q: How will they transport the food?**

*A: The transportation of food, and all raw products is critical. All perishable foods must be held cold (41°F or below) or hot (140°F or above) during transit. The caterers can use refrigerated trucks, insulated coolers, warming units, etc. If they do not, insist on it.*

### **Q: How will the food be kept hot or cold during the party/serving?**

*A: No cooked food should sit at room temperature for more than two to three hours. Cold foods must be kept at 41°F or below by using coolers, insulated containers, or on a bed of crushed ice. They can serve hot foods from chafing dishes or warming units that maintain the foods at 140°F or above.*

**Q: How is the caterer planning to replenish foods on buffet tables?**

*A: The caterer should prepare many dishes of each food to be served. The back up dishes should be kept cold or hot before serving. When the plates are empty, they should be removed and replaced with full trays. It is unsafe to add new food to a serving dish that has been out of refrigeration or hot holding.*

**Q: What will be done with leftovers?**

*A: If the food is prepared under safe food handling practices, and held at safe temperatures throughout the party, enjoying the leftovers should be safe. Divide the leftovers into smaller portions for quick chilling or freezing. Use anything you plan to refrigerate within 1-2 days. Make sure that you reheat the leftovers thoroughly before serving. When in doubt, throw it out!*

**HAPPY PARTYING**