

APRIL 29, 2003

**SCHAKOWSKY, DURBIN SEEK ANSWERS FROM AGRICULTURE SECRETARY VENEMAN ON HOW AMMONIA-TAINTED SCHOOL LUNCHES WERE SERVED TO ILLINOIS STUDENTS**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) today requested a meeting with Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman to seek answers about *"a situation in which Illinois students were served tainted foods due in part to an apparent failure by the USDA to adequately regulate food served in the school lunch program."*

*"Illinois officials have confirmed a disturbing Chicago Tribune report ("Food Safety Plans Failed State Schools," April 27, 2003) that revealed Illinois schools received ammonia-tainted food and did not receive adequate notification that the product had been contaminated,"* they wrote in a letter to the Secretary.□□

They continued, "According to St. Louis and Missouri health officials, USDA apparently allowed the tainted food to be shipped out of a St. Louis warehouse after the ammonia leak was discovered and despite a quarantine order. Illinois School Board officials say they were told the food - which was part of the USDA's donated commodity program - was safe to distribute. Yet a number of children became ill after eating the contaminated food."□

They added in the letter to the Secretary, *"we are eager to meet with you to determine what steps your Department is taking to prevent similar occurrences in the future, and to seek your support of legislative measures to ensure the safety of food served in our schools."*

Schakowsky and Durbin are authors of the Safe School Lunch Act (S.506 and H.R1551) which would address many of the problems highlighted in the Illinois incident.□ The legislation would require mandatory recall of tainted foods, notification by the federal government to states that the states are in possession of contaminated foods; improved communications between federal and state agencies; and creation of an *"information-sharing database to provide schools with the latest safety-compliance information about the vendors they do business with."*

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□ Below is the full text of the letter to Secretary Veneman:

April 29, 2003

The Honorable Ann M. Veneman  
Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture  
14th and Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

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Dear Secretary Veneman:

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We would like to request a meeting at your earliest convenience to discuss a situation in which Illinois students were served tainted foods due in part to an apparent failure by the USDA to adequately regulate food served in the school lunch program. Because we are certain that you share our concerns about the rise in the number of food-borne illness outbreaks in schools across the country, we are eager to meet with you to determine what steps your Department is taking to prevent similar occurrences in the future, and to seek your support of legislative measures to ensure the safety of food served in our schools.

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Illinois officials have confirmed a disturbing Chicago Tribune report ("Food Safety Plans Failed State Schools," April 27, 2003) that revealed Illinois schools received ammonia-tainted food and did not receive adequate notification that the product had been contaminated. According to St. Louis and Missouri health officials, USDA apparently allowed the tainted food to be shipped out of a St. Louis warehouse after the ammonia leak was discovered and despite a quarantine order. Illinois School Board officials say they were told the food - which was part of the USDA's donated commodity program - was safe to distribute. Yet a number of children became ill after eating the contaminated food.

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As you know, we are sponsoring the Safe School Lunch Act (S.506 and H.R1551) which would address many of the problems highlighted in the Illinois incident. While the facts are still coming to light in this case, it appears there was a significant breakdown in communication between the USDA, the Illinois Board of Education, the distributor, various state public health officials and schools regarding the distribution of the tainted food. This breakdown illustrates some of the shortcomings we see in the current recall procedures employed by the USDA, where it is up to a food producer or distributor to voluntarily recall tainted products from schools.

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The Safe School Lunch Act would allow for the mandatory recall and notification by the USDA of any contaminated food deemed to pose a serious health risk. It appears from the November 25, 2002 incident at Laraway School, in which students and teachers were hospitalized after unknowingly consuming the ammonia-laced food, that this food would have been a candidate for mandatory recall. Additionally, the bill would require the USDA to notify states that they are in possession of contaminated food, and for the states in turn to notify all schools within 24 hours to immediately isolate the food and cease serving it. Mandatory recall and notification provisions such as these would have enabled USDA to address this situation in a proactive manner. They also would have eliminated the communication problems found in the Illinois case and prevented the

tainted food from being served in the schools.

□

The legislation also calls for the USDA to organize an information-sharing database to provide schools with the latest safety-compliance information about the vendors they do business with, and to provide schools with guidance when it comes to contracting with vendors. This information would have been useful to the Illinois State Board of Education as it was in the process of renewing a five-year contract with the vendor in question, Lanter Co., while the contaminated food was being shipped to schools.

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We believe it is critical to fully examine the USDA's role in allowing contaminated products to reach school cafeterias in Illinois, and to determine what safeguards are necessary to ensure such preventable incidents never happen again.

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While we understand you are conducting an internal investigation into this matter, we are anxious to hear what immediate steps your Department is taking to ensure the safety of food being served in our schools.□ Please contact us as soon as possible to arrange a meeting to discuss these important matters that affect the health and safety of school children across America.