

APRIL 30, 2002

SCHAKOWSKY, DURBIN HOLD JOINT HEARING ON FOOD SAFETY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SCHAKOWSKY CALLS FOR NATIONAL DATABASE TO PROVIDE LOCAL OFFICIALS WITH INFORMATION ON VENDORS PRIOR TO AWARDING SCHOOL LUNCH CONTRACTS

WASHINGTON, D.C. - During a joint House-Senate committee hearing on school lunch safety, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) today said, "With all the concerns they have today, parents deserve a federal guarantee that the food their children eat at school is safe." □ □

The House Subcommittee on Government Efficiency, Financial Management, and Intergovernmental Relations in cooperation with the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia held a hearing on "Kids and Cafeterias: How Safe are Federal School Lunches?" □ Members of the Committees examined a recent report by the General Accounting Office, which found an increase in the number of school-related outbreaks, and heard testimony from Administration officials, consumer advocates, and families of young victims. □

□ Schakowsky, who is Ranking Member on the Subcommittee on Government Efficiency, said the that "our nation's food inspection program is arbitrary." □ She called for passage of legislation by Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), the Food Safety Act, to create a single food inspection agency.

She added that until such an agency is created, immediate steps could be taken to increase food safety in school cafeterias. "One of the key ingredients in making school lunches safer is to provide local school districts better information with which to make decisions. □ This can be done today."

Schakowsky called for a national database that would provide school districts with information on vendors prior to awarding school lunch contracts. □ "This database would include the same information the USDA uses in its contracting decisions. □ In addition, it would include information from the FDA on inspection and compliance. □ In other words, the federal government should be providing not just money and goods to local school systems, but the information they need to protect our children," she said.

□ "Local officials are responsible for the safety of the children in their school, but often don't have the necessary information to make well-informed choices. □ Local officials cannot distinguish a supplier with good health records from one with a history of health violations," Schakowsky concluded.

According to a series of articles in the Chicago Tribune last year, a number of school food outbreaks reported to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention rose by 56 percent in the eight years from 1990 through 1997. The number of school outbreaks to climb since 1997.

The following witnesses testified at today's hearing:

- The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro, Member of Congress;

- Lawrence J. Dyckman, director, Natural Resources and Environment, GAO, accompanied by Maria Christina Gobin, Assistant Director, Natural Resources and Environment, and Brad C. Dobbins, Senior Analyst;

- Dr. Lester Crawford, Deputy Commissioner, Food and Drug Administration;

- Caroline Smith DeWaal, Director, Program on Food Safety, Center for Science in the Public Interest;

- Mary Klatko, Food Service Director, Howard County Schools, Howard County, MD, representing the American School Food Service Association accompanied by Barry Sackin, American School Food Service Association;

- Donna Maxwell, Kennewick, Washington; and,

- Cheryl and Tyler Roberts, Comer, GA.

Below is Schakowsky's full subcommittee hearing statement.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JAN SCHAKOWSKY
RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY, FINANCIAL
MANAGEMENT AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS**

JOINT HEARING ON FOOD SAFETY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Thank you Senator Durbin, Senator Voinovich, and Representative Horn for holding this hearing. It is significant that this hearing is both bipartisan and bicameral because it emphasizes the importance we place on our public schools and protecting the health of children.

The federal role in safe foods dates to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act nearly 100 years ago. Congress declared that safe food was a national priority. Food safety in public schools, now more than ever before, must be a national priority.

During the five years from 1990 through 1994, for example, Illinois authorities reported only three school food outbreaks, in which 66 children were sickened. But during the next six years, the average annual number of Illinois school food outbreaks more than tripled, and the number of youths affected increased tenfold, state records show.

Over the last century, the labeling and inspection of food has become an extensive and complicated business. The local school kitchen with cooks who made large batches of food from scratch has been replaced by a heat-and-serve institution that serves prepackaged meals. The web of suppliers, producers, and regulators in the food service industry have left local officials in a difficult place and have put the health of our nation's children in jeopardy. Local officials are responsible for the safety of the children in their school, but often don't have the necessary information to make well-informed choices. Local officials cannot distinguish a supplier with good health records from one with a history of health violations.

The white-flour tortillas suspected in 1,200 school illnesses in 1998 were produced by Munoz Flour Tortilleria Inc. in an unmarked factory at 1850 W. 43rd St. for example. FDA inspections from 1996 and 1997 (done under contract with the Illinois Department of Public Health) noted sanitation deficiencies there. But that plant was not inspected by any food safety agency during the eight months in 1998 when it produced the tortillas linked to the school food outbreaks. Following a flurry of inspection prompted by the outbreaks, the plant was not inspected again after the summer of 1999, although it continued to supply school food manufacturers.

In today's hearing we will hear about specific cases of illness that resulted from food borne diseases, and we will hear about large-scale outbreaks across several states - all within our public schools. Once a food borne illness is identified, it is often difficult to trace back to the source. The complex nature of packaged food production results in ingredients coming from a wide variety of sources. Any single ingredient can be the source of the illness, and yet food manufactures often cannot provide investigators with the source of the ingredients for a specific batch of food.

One of the lessons from today's hearings is that students in public schools are being served prepackaged foods, and they need more federal protection than ever before. The interstate nature of the food industry, and particularly food delivered to our public schools, requires continued and vigilant federal food safety guarantees. Enhanced food inspection and tracking is essential.

Our food inspection program is arbitrary. Food monitored by the Department of Agriculture is inspected daily. Food inspected by the FDA is not. This is one of the problems Senator Durbin's bill would resolve. Rep. DeLauro has introduced the companion bill in the House, and I am proud to be a cosponsor of that bill.

However, there is much that can be done by the agencies now before we pass the Food Safety Act. One of the key ingredients in making school lunches safer is to provide local school districts better information with which to make decisions. This can be done today.

The USDA has a great deal of information about the inspections that it conducts. It then uses that information in deciding what companies will get USDA contracts. Unfortunately, local school districts do not have access to the same information about food providers. They often buy unknowingly from firms with a long history of safety violations.

Until the Food Safety Act is law, I would like to see the USDA and the FDA work together to provide local school districts with a comprehensive database that could be used in awarding school lunch contracts. This database would include the same information the USDA uses in its contracting decisions. In addition, it would include information from the FDA on inspection and compliance. In other words, the federal government should be providing not just money and goods to local school systems, but the information they need to protect our children.

With all of the concerns they have today, parents deserve a federal guarantee that the food their children eat at school is safe. Ask any parent if it is worth the cost and they will tell you their child's health comes first. They are right and the federal government has a major role to play.

Again, thank you Chairman Durbin, Senator Voinovich, and Chairman Horn for holding this hearing, and I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses.