

Officials charged in toxic lunches

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By Katie Phillips

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Two top state school officials were indicted Wednesday on 45 counts of reckless conduct for the roles they played in a food poisoning outbreak that sickened 42 students and two teachers at a Joliet school.

Charged were Mark Haller, the division administrator for the state's school nutrition program, and Katherine Keylor, a principal consultant for the program.

The charges follow a five-month investigation into why the pupils and teachers became ill after eating chicken tenders last fall at Laraway Elementary School, 275 W. Laraway Road.

The state employees failed to warn Laraway officials that the chicken was contaminated with ammonia even though they received complaints from seven other cafeteria managers regarding food that strongly smelled of ammonia, the complaint alleges.

The state employees ordered the food be destroyed or returned, but they did not notify other districts or recall the adulterated food, the complaint said.

"It took the poisoning of 42 children before they acted," Will County State's Attorney Jeff Tomczak said.

"The board of education was asleep at the wheel. I hope these charges serve as a wake-up call."

Tomczak said he believes this is the first time state officials are being held responsible for their actions "by the citizens who pay their salaries."

Haller was removed from his administrative position Wednesday and is being re-assigned pending the outcome of the indictment, said Wade Nelson, state board of education spokesman.

Keylor retired in February, Nelson said.

If convicted of reckless conduct, a class A misdemeanor, Haller and Keylor could be sentenced to up to a year in jail and fined up to \$2,500.

Their first court date is June 2.

"I believe that Kathy Keylor has been an exceptional employee and conducted herself within the highest standard of her office and profession," her attorney Ray Nash said.

"We don't feel that Kathy's story has been fully presented to the public as yet. ... We plan to present that information in trial."

Internal documents show Keylor e-mailed Haller, her boss, in August 2002 suggesting the state warn schools about foul-smelling food. Her suggestion was ignored, Nash said. Haller could not be reached for comment.

Investigators said criminal charges may also be filed against officials at the private agencies that stored or shipped the food, although it may be beyond Tomczak's authority to go after the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs the nation's school lunch program.

Parents who attended Tomczak's news conference Wednesday were pleased to see state employees being held accountable.

"I am certainly not sending my daughter to school thinking she would get sick from food," Clifford McFarland said. "I sent her there to learn. It should've never got to this point."

The contamination problems began in November 2001, when a refrigeration pipe burst at Gateway Cold Storage Inc., a storage facility in St. Louis that stored food for the USDA's school lunch program.

Ninety pounds of liquid ammonia soaked cardboard boxes, and toxic fumes seeped into plastic bags containing food.

The leak was brought to the state board's attention by school officials who complained they received food with a strong ammonia odor, according to state documents obtained by the Daily Southtown.

Illinois state education officials and health officials in St. Louis and Missouri quarantined the damaged food at the warehouse until the products were fumigated and repackaged.

"We thought we were dealing with a packaging problem, not a food safety problem," Nelson

said.

Despite the quarantine, Gateway shipped 2,085 cases of potato wedges, 353 cases of turkey ham and 1,366 cases of beef patties that were stored at the time of the leak, documents show.

St. Louis and Missouri health officials allege the USDA allowed the shipments, but the USDA denies the claim.

In November 2002, Laraway Elementary School officials notified the Will County Health Department that several dozen children became sick within an hour of eating lunches of chicken tenders, green beans and apricots.

"To see all those kids vomiting and crying, that was hard," said language arts teacher Adrian Dodson, who also became sick after eating the contaminated food.

Eighteen ambulances transported the food poisoning victims to five area hospitals. Hospital staff said some students complained the food smelled like window cleaner.

State health officials confirmed the children's suspicions in December when they announced that the poultry was contaminated with ammonia.

The chicken samples collected at Laraway School showed ammonia levels ranging from 500 to 2,000 parts per million. The acceptable level in chicken is 15 parts per million.

The state board ordered the 360 remaining cases of chicken tenders to be collected from more than 40 schools in Illinois.

It is conducting an internal investigation and has drafted new procedures for complaints and recalls of school lunches.

"The changes we've made assure this won't happen again," Nelson said.

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Illinois) and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Evanston) called this week for a meeting with Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman to outline changes that would prevent future food poisoning outbreaks.

The USDA has just received their letter and is reviewing the request.

"Overall, we are committed to a strong regulatory system," spokeswoman Julie Jo Quick said.

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