



# Stronger Partnerships for Safer Food

## *An Agenda for Strengthening State and Local Roles in the Nation's Food Safety System*

### **Backgrounder: Opportunity for Action**

The federal government is poised for action on food safety reform. Congress is actively considering reform legislation, and President Obama has expressed his personal commitment to fundamental change in the food safety system. The recent Salmonella outbreaks have made clear, however, that a food safety reform effort at the federal level will be incomplete and insufficient unless it strengthens the roles of state and local agencies. *The time is ripe for comprehensive action to build an integrated national food safety system based on strong partnerships among federal, state, and local agencies.*

### **Problems in the Current Food Safety System**

Food safety officials have improved their collaboration in recent years, but persistent problems in the current system demand action, including:

- **Chronic underfunding of state and local food safety programs**, which has resulted in serious gaps in their capacity to both prevent and respond to food safety problems.
- **Wide disparities in the ways that state and local agencies operate**, which undermine the consistency and effectiveness of state and local food safety efforts.
- **Fragmentation and resulting inefficiency** in the combined effort of thousands of federal, state and local agencies working on food safety.
- **Persistent legal, technical and bureaucratic obstacles to real partnership**, including constraints on the sharing of information that could improve outbreak response and the targeting and effectiveness of inspection and enforcement.
- **Lack of adequately coordinated response to major, multi-state illness outbreaks**, as illustrated by the 2008 *Salmonella* Saintpaul outbreak, which was thought first to involve tomatoes and latter peppers.
- **Insufficient integration of food safety inspection and enforcement** at all levels of government, as evidenced by the 2008-2009 *Salmonella* outbreak involving peanut butter.

## Features of an Integrated National Food Safety System

An integrated national food safety system would include:

- **A clear Congressional mandate to build an integrated system**, with accountability for federal leadership lodged at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and mechanisms established for federal-state-local collaboration in the design and implementation of the system.
- **Joint funding responsibility among federal, state and local governments** and new food safety block grants and other funding mechanisms to build consistent capacity nationwide for responding to and preventing foodborne illness.
- **Integrated programs to generate and share data to prevent foodborne illness**, including human illness and food contamination data, research to support prevention strategies, and inspection findings.
- **Integrated inspection and enforcement programs** that would make cost-effective use of all available resources to target compliance efforts for maximum public health benefit.

## Policymaker Support for an Integrated National Food Safety System

Federal elected officials embrace the need for a food safety system that better integrates the efforts of federal, state and local agencies.

- In July 2008, then-**Senator Barack Obama** introduced the *Improving Food-borne Illness Surveillance and Response Act of 2008* (S.3358, 110<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess.), which expressly directs that HHS forge a true partnership among federal, state and local agencies to: (1) ensure that needed foodborne illness data are collected and seamlessly shared, and (2) strengthen state and local capacity and “make more effective use of the Nation’s combined food safety resources to reduce the burden of food-borne illness.”
- In the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, several major food safety reform bills with provisions similar to those in Senator Obama’s bill have been introduced, including:
  - S. 510, the *FDA Food Safety Modernization Act*, introduced by **Sen. Durbin**, with significant co-sponsorship (Sens. Alexander, Burr, Chambliss, Dodd, Gregg, Isakson, Kennedy, Klobuchar).
  - H.R. 1332, the *Safe Food Enforcement, Assessment, Standards, and Targeting Act of 2009*, introduced by **Rep. Costa**, with 28 co-sponsors.
  - H.R. 875, the *Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009*, introduced by **Rep. DeLauro** with 41 co-sponsors.