

Enhancing Food Safety at Special Events

Date: December 31, 2024

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

There are hundreds of special events in Toronto throughout the year and especially during the summer adding to the vibrancy of the city. Special events include street festivals, fairs, marathons/runs, concerts, and other large gatherings, that often have food vendors present. Toronto Public Health (TPH) protects health at these special events by taking a proactive approach including providing guidance to vendors before an event, enforcing food safety rules, and following up on complaints during and after the event ends. Food safety rules can be complex, and food vendors at special events are held to the same standard as permanent food premises but must achieve these standards while outside in crowded areas with limited infrastructure.

The number of special events is expected to increase as the City [takes steps to grow the number of non-permanent food locations](#) by creating new spaces for events like farmers markets. While these are welcomed changes that support the city's vibrancy, they also significantly increase the workload for public health inspectors. As special events are clustered in the summer months, operate on weekends/evenings, and concurrently with peak times for other work, it can be difficult to ensure food safety through inspection only and other options to advance these goals should be considered. To reduce risks for food safety issues while managing operational constraints, TPH is recommending the Food Safety Management Plan (FSMP), a new, voluntary, tool for event organizers which promotes proactive and preventative approaches to special event food safety. The introduction of the FSMP tool is supported by additional educational resources for both organizers and vendors of special events. The effectiveness of the FSMP will be evaluated during this time and TPH will report back to the Board of Health in Q2 2026 on the outcomes of the new tool and on the feasibility of requiring it in the special event permitting processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to implement the voluntary Food Safety Management Plan tool in time for the summer 2025 special event season.
2. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to collect feedback and data from special event organizers on the implementation of the Food Safety Management Plan tool and report back to the Board of Health in Q2 of 2026 on next steps, including exploring the feasibility of incorporating a requirement for special event organizers to submit a Food Safety Management Plan as part of the special event permitting processes.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts associated with the recommendations of this report. The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

On July 4, 2023, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health explore the feasibility of requiring a Food Safety Management Plan for each organization that applies for a special event permit that includes the provision of food, in consultation with relevant City divisions, and report back to the Board of Health on the outcomes of this work by the fourth quarter of 2024.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL5.1>

COMMENTS

Food Safety at TPH

Toronto Public Health (TPH) develops and implements robust programs focused on safe food handling and production and supporting safety in the distribution of drinking water. The Food Safety team is responsible for administering the [Health Protection and Promotion Act, Ontario Food Premises Regulation, O. Reg 493/17](#), and the [Food Safety Protocol of the Ontario Public Health Standards](#). The main goal of the food safety program is to reduce the incidence of foodborne illness through a comprehensive set of activities that includes these and other components:

- Verifying that food handlers have received their food handler certification during inspections and validating certificates;
- Enforcing the food premises regulations through inspections, tickets and charges;

- Conducting epidemiological analyses of surveillance data;
- Linking food vendors with Ministry of Health accredited food handler training and certification; and
- Responding in a timely manner to:
 - Reports of food-borne illnesses or outbreaks;
 - Unsafe food-handling practices, food recalls, adulteration and consumer complaints; and
 - Food-related issues arising from floods, fires, power outages or other situations that may affect food safety.

A key companion to the TPH food safety program is the DineSafe disclosure program that transparently provides public information verifying safe food handling processes are in place at the over 17,000 food premises in Toronto. The Special Event Food Safety program works to adapt all the above requirements to special events.

Food Safety at Special Events

The Special Event Food Safety program ensures food safety at special events, supporting the ability of residents to gather and to host exciting events celebrating culture, entertainment, and community in Toronto. As new event spaces are established across the city, many more events are expected to be scheduled in the coming years. Each event can employ multiple food vendors selling or distributing food at trucks, booths, or temporary kitchens. These events require planning and collaboration by organizers, vendors, and City divisions such as Municipal Licensing and Standards (MLS), Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR), and TPH. TPH's role, per the Ontario Food Safety Protocol, is to establish and implement procedures to monitor or inspect transient and temporary food premises, including those operating at temporary special events (e.g., street festivals, charity runs, events open to the public, etc.). This role extends to providing the appropriate level of education and inspections a food vendor may require. Special events pose additional risks, as they often employ temporary food premises, which may lack access to water, sufficient clean surfaces, and mechanical refrigeration, all of which help prevent food from becoming unsafe. Hot summer temperatures further increase the risk of the growth of harmful bacteria if food is not properly prepared and stored.

From January to October 2024, TPH received and provided food safety consultations for approximately 1,400 special events, and reviewed applications of 4,446 food vendors who participated in these events. Special event activity peaks during the warmer months. In one day in June 2024, there was a peak of 34 special events in the City operating concurrently.

Resulting increases in special event inspection needs significantly increases the workload for Public Health Inspectors (inspectors), at the same time of the year when restaurant and patio activity, which require continued routine inspections, are all increasing. A preventive approach to food safety benefits all parties, organizers, vendors, and the Food Safety team, by allowing for the provision of the best possible service and increases in safety. TPH continues to develop more modern, digital tools for more streamlined ways of working, such as new online options for submitting special event notifications and food vendor packages.

Collaboration with Event Organizers

TPH's Food Safety program has supported special events in the city with inspectors engaging both event organizers and food vendors. Generally, all pre-event food safety reviews, guidance, and consultations have been directly between inspectors and food vendors. Very few event organizers have been involved consistently in the vendor food safety process and their role has often been limited to notifying TPH of their special event and providing food vendor information upon request. TPH recommends that event organizers consider food safety as part of their event planning and be engaged early by TPH to support this work.

Some event organizers are actively engaged with TPH throughout the event planning stage, for example:

- Organizers of Khalsa Day and the Caribbean Carnival reach out to TPH months in advance of the event. Together, TPH and these event organizers arrange for pre-event site walkthroughs with inspectors and food safety training for their food vendors.
- The organizers of the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) also arrange for pre-event consultation with TPH, employ a third-party company to oversee food safety and food vendors through the entire event, and work with TPH to arrange for food safety training for all food handlers participating in the event.

When organizers are more involved in ensuring food safety is central to planning the event, food vendors receive more training, issues are prevented, and risks of people getting sick are lower. TPH staff have initiated development of new ways to promote event organizer engagement, provide more consultations in advance, and set a precedent for better communication. These improvements include the development of the Food Safety Management Plan (FSMP) tool and supporting resources.

The Food Safety Management Plan Tool

The FSMP is a voluntary, online tool, supported by new educational resources also provided online. Event organizers can choose to build their FSMP completely online or print a PDF version for completion as a hard copy.

The FSMP has four areas of focus:

- Event location planning,
- Food vendor selection and verification tips,
- Suggested planned food safety activities that can be conducted throughout the event, and
- Templates for developing Food Safety Emergency Plans.

The FSMP tool will assist organizers with considering food safety best practices earlier in the event planning process and during the event, such as:

- Planning and use of the event location, for example, using indoor and outdoor event spaces properly, situating food vendors in the space to reduce the likelihood of food safety issues,
- Identifying discrete actions that can be taken to improve safety at their events,

- Instructing organizers on how to create a culture of food safety with the food vendors, and
- Showing event organizers how to put all the above pieces together in an organized way and ensure they are fully documented.

The tool provides a mechanism for TPH to flag any potential areas for improvement earlier in the planning process for both special event organizers and vendors. Farmers' markets and other special events are also avenues for new food vendors to launch and grow their food businesses. The proactive focus of the FSMP tool also benefits organizers and TPH to support newer or less experienced vendors with ways of successfully and safely participating in special events.

To prepare for the introduction of this tool, TPH participated in the City's special events team's presentation of updates to special event organizers on October 29, 2024. During the presentation, participants showed an interest in greater involvement in food safety and for more tools and resources to support this interest. In addition, TPH engaged the three divisions at the City that are responsible for permitting special events, including: Parks, Forestry and Recreation, which oversees permits for events in parks and recreation centres, Corporate Real Estate Management, which oversees permits for events at Civic Squares, and Transportation Services, which oversees permits for street events. All three divisions were generally supportive of the initiative and TPH will continue to engage with City divisions as the work progresses over 2025. Staff will report back in 2026 on next steps regarding the FSMP, including how it could complement and align with existing permitting processes.

Alignment with the 2024-2028 Toronto Public Health Strategic Plan

This work supports TPH's requirements under the Health Protection and Promotion Act (HPPA) and aligns with TPH's new Strategic Plan:

- Priority 1(A): Prepare for and respond to outbreaks and public health emergencies informed by best evidence and lessons learned from previous responses.
- Priority 1(C): Effectively communicate with the public about how they can protect their health.
- Priority 2(D): Advocate for healthy social, natural, and built environments and collaborate with partners on initiatives that advance these goals.

Next Steps

With approval of the recommendations associated with this report, TPH will implement the FSMP tool as a voluntary program. It will also collect data and feedback to evaluate the FSMP's utility and effectiveness. Once these data are collected, the Food Safety program will analyze them and engage with other City divisions to explore how this more proactive approach to food and water safety at special events might be incorporated into the City's Special Events existing approval/permitting processes.

TPH will report back to the Board of Health in Q2 of 2026 on next steps, including exploring the feasibility of incorporating a requirement for special event organizers to submit a FSMP as part of the special event permitting process.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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