

FOOD SAFETY TRAINING FOR KEEPERS IN DECENTRALIZED ZOO KITCHENS.

*Devan Paulus Compart**

Lincoln Park Zoo, 2001 N Clark St Chicago, Illinois 60614, USA.

Abstract

A food safety program was developed for training keepers in a decentralized zoo kitchen system. Instruction covered food safety standards of the state of Illinois; reviewed information regarding USDA and AZA food safety standards; and provided keepers with action-based steps they could take to prevent food safety concerns. In addition, lead keepers had separate sessions to ensure food safety standards have been met by their direct reports. Keepers provided positive feedback regarding the sessions. Nutrition Center management conducting the training gained valuable insight regarding issues that interfere with proper food safety procedures and protocols within decentralized animal food kitchens.

Introduction

Zoos with decentralized animal food kitchens face challenges regarding food safety not generally observed in centralized kitchens. A number of keepers are handling animal food thus making them partially responsible for maintaining food safety at the zoo. However, most of these staff will not have undergone any food safety training. Having uncertified food handlers puts zoos at risk, as USDA and AZA standards for food safety may not be met.

In an effort to improve food safety throughout a zoo's decentralized animal food preparation kitchen system, a program was instituted to train all keepers in proper food safety methods. Further training was provided to lead keepers to overcome management issues associated with food safety.

Food Safety Training Goals

Three main goals were in place for the food safety training program. First, it was made clear that keepers handling animal food are partially responsible for maintaining food safety in a zoo. Secondly, education of keepers on action-based steps was provided so they could take steps to minimize food safety risks in their routines. Finally, keepers were provided critical food safety concerns that would be under scrutiny during inspections conducted by USDA or AZA.

Training Sessions

Training was conducted in eight identical sessions with small (4-6) and large (7-15) sized groups of keepers. The initial three sessions were provided to keepers located in a single animal building, while the remaining sessions were made up of keepers from various animal buildings throughout the zoo. This was done to ensure all keepers were able to attend training sessions regardless of their schedule.

Training included a 35 minute PowerPoint presentation conducted by the Nutrition Center Manager of Lincoln Park Zoo. Keepers were encouraged to actively participate in the presentation by asking the instructor questions.

Training Subject Matter

The first portion of the training session covered Nutrition Center operations. This topic included the inventory ordering process, as well as general tasks completed by Nutrition Center staff. The goal of this component was to familiarize keepers with the food safety steps taken within the centralized kitchen before it was forwarded to them. Information was included about ordering from reputable vendors, inspecting orders upon arrival, and inspecting food products before sending them to decentralized kitchens.

The second portion of the training covered basic food safety information using restaurant standards of the state of Illinois. Topics included preventing bacterial, chemical, and physical contamination; safe facilities; proper food storage and handling; and proper thawing and cooking methods. This portion of the training was designed as action-oriented, providing keepers with specific steps that they could take to reduce food safety risks. Examples of action-oriented steps were provided to the keepers, including wearing latex gloves over Kevlar gloves; working with small portions of raw meat at a time to minimize exposure to non-refrigerator temperatures; and sanitizing counters between working with produce and meat.

The third portion of the training covered the identification of unsafe food products including categories of produce, meat, fish, forages, complete feeds, and ready-to-eat products. Keepers were provided with action-based steps that they could take when food safety concerns were identified, such as taking photos of the unsafe products and contacting the Nutrition Center manager.

The final portion of the training covered kitchen inspections using information from the kitchen inspection checklist utilized at Lincoln Park Zoo. Prior to this training, keepers had little understanding regarding what critical steps needed to be taken in order to have kitchens compliant with USDA and AZA standards; thus, decentralized kitchens frequently failed to be compliant during routine inspections conducted by the Nutrition Center manager at Lincoln Park Zoo.

Observations

Positive feedback regarding the training sessions was obtained from both large and small groups of keepers, as well as sessions conducted with one house of keepers versus multiple houses of keepers. However, it was observed that small groups tended to interact with the Nutrition Center manager more frequently and ask more direct questions. Small groups also posed a wider range of questions that covered not only zoological food safety, but also human kitchen food safety. Training offered to keepers working in the same decentralized kitchen resulted in keepers asking questions more directly related to specific food safety issues they face thereby allowing the Nutrition Center manager to provide directly applicable help and resources.

Lead Keeper Training

In addition to general food safety training, supplementary training sessions were completed with lead keepers with the goal of helping them identify strategies to ensure direct reports were compliant with food safety protocols and procedures. This training was conducted in two sessions with 3-5 lead keepers in each session. Training took place in various decentralized kitchens throughout Lincoln Park Zoo. In each kitchen, the lead keeper managing the kitchen

described methods they utilized to ensure food safety protocols and procedures were met. This demonstration was followed by a discussion among training participants regarding the pros and cons of various management methods, as well as discussion regarding the feasibility of implementing the various methods in their own kitchens. Overall, these training sessions were primarily lead keeper led with minimal input from the Nutrition Center manager other than session coordination.

Lead keepers expressed positive feedback regarding their personalized training session. Many found that they were able to gather new ideas that could be implemented in their own kitchens. In addition, it was an opportunity for lead keepers to discuss how various management techniques could be applied in the unique kitchens they manage. It was noted that most lead keepers felt that lack of support from upper management was a major hindrance in their ability to properly manage food safety in their kitchens. Further, several lead keepers stated that lack of keeper interest in food safety resulted in failure to follow-through on food safety protocols and procedures.

Conclusions

Overall, food safety training provided to keepers in a decentralized kitchen system resulted in positive feedback from training participants and increased interest in food safety. In addition, providing lead keepers with additional training allowed for critical feedback regarding food safety policy and procedure implementation issues in decentralized animal food kitchens. It is recommended that zoological institutions with decentralized kitchens provide training to all zoo keepers handling animal food as a means of reducing food safety risks and ensuring USDA and AZA food safety standards are met.