



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health

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HEALTH UNIT PARTICIPATION IN FOODNET CANADA

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health approve the Health Unit's participation in FoodNet Canada.

Key Points

- Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), FoodNet Canada is an enhanced integrated surveillance program for food- and water-borne illnesses, such as *E. coli* O157:H7, listeria and salmonella.
- The Health Unit has been offered the opportunity to become the Ontario sentinel site in FoodNet Canada.
- As the Ontario sentinel site, PHAC would provide the Health Unit with additional funding to carry out the enhanced case investigation and retail sampling components of the FoodNet Canada program.

What is FoodNet Canada?

In the past, there have been a number of high-profile national and provincial food- and water-borne outbreaks, including the Walkerton *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak (2000), a listeria outbreak associated with deli meats (2008), and national (2012) and provincial (2013) outbreaks of *E. coli* O157:H7 associated with hamburger. Given these and other events, enhanced and integrated surveillance of human illness, food and water information is a priority at both the federal and provincial levels of government.

Established in 2005, FoodNet Canada is a national enhanced integrated surveillance program for food- and water-borne illnesses that cause gastroenteritis, such as *E. coli* O157:H7, listeria and salmonella. The objectives of FoodNet Canada include:

- Detecting changes in human illness, and in the levels of exposure to pathogens that cause illness;
- Determining what foods, water and animal sources are making Canadians ill; and
- Determining the risk factors associated with experiencing food- and water-borne illness.

Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), FoodNet Canada is a collaborative initiative involving the federal government, local public health units, provincial ministries of health, and public health laboratories.

The program is comprised of the following components:

- Collecting comprehensive information from people with reportable enteric illnesses to help determine the extent and potential source of their illness, including enhanced laboratory testing;
- Purchasing products of interest, such as meat and produce, from local grocery stores on a weekly basis to test for infectious agents; and
- Sampling of manure and surface water to test for infectious agents.

Currently, there are participating sentinel sites in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario with plans for further expansion of the program.

Funding for Ontario Sentinel Site of FoodNet Canada

PHAC has offered the Health Unit the opportunity to become the Ontario sentinel site for FoodNet Canada. As such, additional funding would be provided to carry out the enhanced human case investigation and weekly retail sampling components of the program. Funding for 1.0 FTE Site Coordinator and 0.2 FTE Public Health Inspector (PHI) would be provided, as well as for other administrative and program expenses, as outlined in [Appendix A](#). This cycle of FoodNet Canada funding would be administered through a three-year Memorandum of Agreement in place until March 31, 2017, with an option for extension being foreseeable.

Proposed Staffing

FoodNet Canada sentinel sites are required to identify a Site Coordinator. In addition to being the primary point of contact between PHAC and the local public health unit, Site Coordinator responsibilities include coordinating the collection of human illness information and related data management, as well as overseeing retail sampling activities. The 1.0 FTE Site Coordinator position could be filled either by a Public Health Inspector (PHI), a Public Health Nurse, or an Epidemiologist. Additionally, a 0.2 FTE PHI would be hired to conduct weekly sampling at grocery stores, which entails purchasing specific products of interest, and shipping the food samples for laboratory testing.

Potential Benefits and Risks of Participating in FoodNet Canada

Participation in FoodNet Canada will provide the Health Unit with the opportunity to better understand the nature and causes of food- and water-borne illnesses in the Middlesex-London region, and thereby better serve the community, as well as inform future program decisions. Additionally, there is a provincial initiative under way for all health units to investigate human cases of enteric illness in a more standardized and in-depth way; participating in FoodNet Canada would allow the Health Unit to be a funded early adopter of this approach. Being the Ontario sentinel site may enhance the Health Unit's capacity in a variety of ways, such as staff development, analytical support, and assistance with outbreak investigations. Finally, as the Ontario sentinel site, the Health Unit would be contributing to an important provincial and federal priority, and would be a leader in this area.

Participation in FoodNet Canada has been assessed by a review panel under the Health Unit's Research Advisory Committee (RAC). Identified considerations included the time required for the Infectious Disease Control (IDC) team to implement and administer the program, and potentially others within the Health Unit to respond to issues that may arise. However, the Site Coordinator role would mitigate some of these impacts. As well, Human Resources, Information Technology and Finance and Operations Services may be impacted, since support would be required from these areas. From a privacy perspective, all human illness information shared with PHAC would be de-identified, and covered under current surveillance requirements. Clients being interviewed regarding their enteric illness would be provided a clear, plain language description of the reasons for collecting their information and how it will be managed, per usual requirements.

Next Steps

If the Board of Health approves participation in FoodNet Canada, the Health Unit will formally accept the offer to become the Ontario sentinel site. The next steps would be to sign the Memorandum of Agreement with PHAC, to begin working toward establishing the supportive infrastructure necessary to participate in FoodNet Canada and to proceed with hiring the 1.0 FTE Site Coordinator and the 0.2 FTE Public Health Inspector.

This report was prepared by Ms. Alison Locker, Epidemiologist, Oral Health, Communicable Disease and Sexual Health Service, Mr. Tristan Squire-Smith, Manager, Infectious Disease Control Team, and Dr. Bryna Warshawsky, Associate Medical Officer of Health.



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This report addresses the following requirements of the Ontario Public Health Standards: Infectious Diseases Prevention and Control; Foundational Standard – Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol.