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HOLIDAY CATERING FOR LARGE PARTIES – CAN YOU DO IT SAFELY?

The Holidays are here again! Cold weather, warm fires, family and friends, shopping, the smell of pumpkin spice and oh yes...FOOD, lots and lots of food! This time of year, office and corporate parties abound. Employees are treated to a smorgasbord of meats, salads, side dishes and desserts. The number of people eating at these events can range from 5 to 500 or more. Out of the 35,000 plus food service establishments in Georgia, your restaurant was chosen to cater one of these events. What could possibly go wrong?

To give you an idea, during the months of November and December of 2009 through 2018, there were seven reported foodborne outbreaks linked to holiday meals. These meals were either served at a restaurant or catered from a permitted food service establishment and served elsewhere. These seven outbreaks accounted for 870 illnesses with a median of 42 illnesses per outbreak. The illnesses were due to *Clostridium perfringens*, norovirus, and *Salmonella*.

Frequently, you may get a request from an office or corporation to cater food for a holiday gathering with many employees, even if you do not typically cater. While this can be exciting news and an excellent way to promote your brand, several things should be taken into consideration when preparing meals for a large catered event. To reduce the chance for a foodborne illness outbreak associated with your establishment, follow these guidelines:

1. Do not prepare and serve any menu item you do not normally serve as part of your regular menu, unless approved to do so by the local health department.
2. Do not use cooking equipment designed to cook one type of food to cook a different type of food, especially if it is not a part of your regular menu.
3. If the food service equipment you have in your restaurant is insufficient to handle an increased cook load or large order, check with your local health department prior to renting or purchasing additional equipment.
4. Be sure you have enough cold holding equipment to handle large orders of any items that will be cooked, cooled and held at your restaurant prior to delivering it to the customer. Ensure you can properly cool food from 135°F to 70°F within 2 hours and then all the way down to 41°F within 4 hours (for a total of 6 hours cooling time). Shredding large pieces of meat, such as turkey or a roast and spreading it out can decrease cooling times.

5. Be mindful of potential limited workspace. Cross-contamination or cross-contact is more likely to occur when larger orders are prepared in smaller food preparation and storage areas.
6. Food that will be delivered to the event location must be transported at 41°F or below OR at 135°F or above. Be sure to verify temperatures before leaving your restaurant and upon arrival at the event.
7. Having a good employee health and hygiene policy in place is critical. Ill employees must never work with food. Good handwashing practices are vital. Touching ready-to-eat foods with bare hands is prohibited.

Following these tips can help reduce your chances of causing holiday festivities to turn into holiday nightmares. When in doubt, always check in with your local health department before conducting any new processes.

Wishing you a safe and happy holiday season on behalf of the Georgia Department of Public Health's Food Service program!