FoodViolations_Michigan_Uplinkstory

First Venture: Local eateries with serious health violations

By Brian McVicar, Muskegon (Mich.) Chronicle | 09.27.2011

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Every day, thousands of Muskegon County residents pour into their favorite restaurants to dine with friends and family. Yet until now, little was known about whether those restaurants followed practices aimed at preventing people from getting sick.

While looking through more than 22,000 electronic health-inspection records spanning four years, I found numerous instances where restaurants repeatedly violated rules that help prevent foodborne illness. Schools, hospitals and food stands were cited for breaking the rules, too.

Raw chicken and crabmeat sitting out at room temperature. Food kept past its expiration date. Cockroaches, mice and fruit flies living in kitchens. Employees not washing their hands properly. Food cooked at improper temperatures.

Those were some of the most risky mistakes I found after I uploaded and analyzed the data in Microsoft Access database manager — a skill I learned at the IRE and NICAR Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp in August 2010.

I wrote seven stories, published over two days, based on the data. The stories drew a strong response from readers, many of whom never knew their favorite restaurants had recently been cited for serious violations.

It was the type of reporting that I couldn't have done had I not attended boot camp and learned how to acquire, sort and crunch data.

Before I learned about the power of electronic records and the quick analysis you can pull off in Microsoft Access and Excel spreadsheets with a few keystrokes, my world had been firmly rooted in paper documents.

Digging through thousands of paper reports in an attempt to spot trends and find which restaurant was accumulating the most serious violations, would have taken months — time my editors would never have granted me.

With the electronic records, however, time wasn't the problem. A basic analysis would take only a few hours.

Getting my county's health department to give me the data was what initially proved challenging.

Public Health-Muskegon County keeps a searchable database of violations on its website, but those inspection reports typically cover only the past year. I wanted several years' worth of data.

When I first approached the health department with my request, I was told the data was kept in a database maintained by a private vendor and couldn't be exported in the format I wanted.

I wasn't surprised.

At boot camp, I learned that such a reaction is typical from government agencies, especially those that aren't regularly approached by journalists looking for electronic records.

As I learned, when requesting data, it's better to be kind, yet persistent, and to work with the agency rather than getting defensive and walking away empty-handed.

I decided to schedule a meeting with the head of the health department, during which I explained my story and what I was looking for. The department agreed to speak with the vendor to find out whether my request could be completed.

The answer was yes, and soon enough I had what I was looking for: more than 22,000 records showing food code violations in Muskegon County from 2007 to 2010.

The data was provided free of charge in an Excel spreadsheet that I imported into Access. To my surprise, the data was clean. There were only a handful of empty cells, and the names and addresses of restaurants were consistently spelled correctly.

There were 10 columns for each record: restaurant, address, city, license number, year of violation, date of violation, whether the violation was critical ["seriousness of the violation"?], the code number of the violation, the title of the violation and a health department sanitarian's description of the violation.

Now it was time to have some fun.

Using Access, I sliced and diced the data in numerous ways. Within hours of receiving the data, I found the restaurant that had accumulated what the government considers "critical" violations.

Here's a look at the powerful, yet simple, Structured Query Language I used for that query:

```
SELECT restaurant, address, count(*)
From Violations
Where critical = "yes"
Group By restaurant, address
Order By count(*) desc
```

That was only the beginning of what I could glean from the data.

The Food and Drug Administration's Food Code contains hundreds of possible violations. They range from kitchens with cracked floor tiles and bathrooms lacking hand-washing signs to food that is improperly cooked and cutting boards and utensils that aren't completely cleaned.

Clearly, having your meal prepared with dirty utensils is a bigger health concern than a kitchen with a cracked floor tile.

So I narrowed my focus to what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers the most risky violations: food kept at unsafe temperatures, food contact surfaces that aren't properly cleaned, employees who exhibit poor personal hygiene, food obtained from unsafe sources and improper cooking times and temperatures.

Isolating these was an easy task with Access. Using the WHERE query, I was able to zero in on several groups of violations considered the most serious and omit the

minor ones.

The strategy proved valuable.

Several restaurant owners I interviewed told me the violations they were cited for were minor and posed no risk to public health. Because of my research and data analysis, I was able to say with authority that the rules they broke were, in fact, considered serious by government regulators and recognized as a public health risk.

In short, I had moved beyond the "he said/she said" reporting I had practiced for much of my career. Using CAR, I was able to spot the spin and challenge the restaurant owners and managers I was interviewing.

I topped off my reporting with requests for my local health department's foodborne illness outbreak reports, which helped me find consumers who got sick after eating out. In addition, I obtained correspondence between restaurants I had identified as the biggest violators and health department administrators.

The documents showed that many restaurants continued to rack up violations at the same time they were being told to change their practices — an indication that some owners weren't taking the health department's citations seriously. It also provided a window into the health department's enforcement practice, which some food safety advocates described as lax.

Along with the stories, we published a chart showing what restaurants received the most violations in several categories, such as a lack of hand washing, not keeping foods at the proper temperature and food contact surfaces that were not properly cleaned.

It was enough to show readers that procedures aimed at keeping food safe were sorely lacking at some restaurants.