When going out to eat, one thing people don't want to worry about is the cleanliness and safety of the restaurant. In Lincoln, restaurants are regularly inspected by the Lincoln-Lancaster Health Department. The department inspects not only restaurants but all locations that produce food for public consumption.

Watching over the cleanliness and safety of the Lincoln restaurants, Lincoln-Lancaster Health Department guards the health of Lincoln residents and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln students.

The department inspects not only restaurants but all locations that produce food for public consumption. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, that includes its five dining halls, Abel Dining, Cather-Pound-Neihardt (CPN) Dining, East Campus Dining, Harper Dining and Selleck Dining.

As the manager of CPN Dining, Joel Fogerty is in charge of making sure the dining hall is compliant with the health department’s regulations. He said one of the biggest things the dining hall has to worry about is the temperatures of foods. Dishes that are served cold must be below 41 degrees while hot food must be above 135 degrees. Employees check cooked foods during the cooking process and also before the meal once they are put out onto the serving line. Employees also check chilled foods before the beginning of each meal.

If there is leftover cooked food, it has to be chilled to specific levels in a specified amount of time to prevent contamination. After two hours, the food must be 70 degrees or below, and after four hours, it must be below 41 degrees. To chill the food fast enough, CPN Dining uses blast chillers, which use fans to circulate cold air.

“You could roll the hot food into the walk-in freezer, but it’s not really good for the freezer,” Fogerty said. “We use the blast chiller to get foods down to storage temperatures, and then put them in the refrigerators. We store everything in shallow pans so that it cools quicker.”

Once the food is chilled, it still needs to be monitored.

“All of our refrigeration has to have two thermometers,” Fogerty said. “Most equipment has one on the outside, and then we always put one on the inside. We then log our refrigeration temperatures twice a day — once in the morning, once at night. That way, if there’s something wrong with a piece of equipment, we can quickly take food out of it.”

For the past three years, CPN Dining struggles with keeping foods cold enough on the salad bar.

“The salad bars are old pieces of equipment,” Fogerty said. “They only get down to about 48 degrees on their own, so we have to put out ice to get it down to 41 degrees.”

Fogerty said the reason the issue hasn’t been permanently fixed is due to the new dining hall, expected to replace CPN Dining in the fall of 2017.

“If we’re moving to a new place in a year, no one wants to spend $50,000 on salad bars you’re going to get rid of in a year,” Fogerty said.

Other dining halls struggle with keeping food cool. Harper Dining, East Campus Dining and Selleck Dining were cited for cold foods being above 41 degrees in 2015.

Out of 11 analyzed restaurants in downtown Lincoln, only one was cited with food temperature issues. In Buffalo Wild Wing’s latest inspection on December 3, 2015, a refrigerator was malfunctioning, causing the food inside to rise above 48 degrees.

Another factor of sanitation that is inspected is the dishwashing process. Dishes must be cleaned with a proper amount of sanitizer, with water above a specific temperature.

“On the back of the dishwasher, there’s four temperature gauges, one for each section,” Fogerty said. “We also have this nifty little thermometer thing that will go through the dishwasher cycle and take temperatures and save them. Then, you can look and see the highest temperatures it went through.”

Sanitation solution level issues seem to be common in both restaurants and dining halls. Four of the five dining halls and three of the 11 downtown restaurants were cited for sanitation solution issues in their latest inspection.

Unclean utensils and appliances were also prevalent in restaurant inspections. Five of the 11 downtown restaurants had utensils stored with food residue on them.

Fogerty said one of the hardest factors to control is the human factor. Every person that is hired must go through training to learn proper sanitation procedures.

“We have a series of six CDs that we have people watch, or they can take an online course,” Fogerty said. “Everybody does the food safety training once a year. It doesn’t make a difference if you wash tables, work in the dish room, or you work on the line.”

Fogerty must also make sure there is a supervisor who has gone through Level 4 training in the building whenever the dining hall is open.

“It’s their responsibility to make sure that everyone else is doing the right things,” Fogerty said.

While the dining halls have all employees complete food safety training, not all restaurants give the same training to their employees. Five of the downtown restaurants had employees with improper or out-of-date training permits.

The median number of critical violations for the dining halls and downtown restaurants is 3 for the most recent inspections of each. Three dining halls had three critical violations or fewer. Abel Dining led the number of critical violations with six, two more than the next restaurant.

Overall, the dining halls at UNL are fairly average in terms of health violations. Fogerty said he thinks inspections offer a chance to see the truth of food facilities.

“I always like when the inspector comes around,” Fogerty said. “My view on inspections is, if you do it right, you shouldn’t have to do a dang thing.”