Northeast Colorado Health Department is hosting an open discussion about food safety in this region Tuesday, Jan. 29 from 1-3 p.m., at NCHD's district headquarters, located at 700 Columbine St. in Sterling.

Members of the food service industry, as well as consumers, are welcome to attend. The meeting is free, but reservations are required.

One of the main items to be addressed during this meeting will be NCHD's move to a risk-based inspection frequency methodology.

A departure from the agency's inspection protocols of once or twice per year, risk-based inspections is a method for determining the frequency of inspections and other interventions based on factors such as food risk, operations, inspection history (both critical items and non-critical items) and weekly meal volume.

"Previously we inspected our retail food establishments once or twice per year, depending on how a facility was categorized," said Carmen Vandenbark, NCHD's environmental health director.

"Facilities that carry only pre-packaged foods and do no food preparation were only inspected once per year, and facilities that utilize a full-service kitchen and do multi-step preparation were inspected twice per year. There are additional inspections if we receive complaints or through follow-up visits when violations are discovered, but for the most part, that was the methodology we were using.

"Under this new system, we're taking a closer look at the risk level of foodborne illness based on a lot of factors," continued Vandenbark.

"An assessment of those factors will give us a more accurate idea of how often we need to be in a facility, whether it's once per year or three times per year. This new method will allow us to

focus our limited resources where there is a higher risk of foodborne illness due to the types of food served and the nature of the processes involved with food handling, cooking and cooling."

According to Vandenbark, NCHD will be better able to monitor the progress of a single retail food establishment or the entire retail food inspection program using the risk-based factors. This new method will also allow for interventions such as formal food safety training and critical item inspections to be substituted for some traditional inspections.

It's based on Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points concepts and knowledge of the factors that cause foodborne illness and is consistent with risk-based frequency of inspection standards contained in the FDA Food Code.

In addition to the risk-based inspection methodology, NCHD will also be discussing a summary of recent changes to the Rules and Regulations Governing Retail Food Establishments.

For more information or to RSVP to the food safety meeting, email Mel Bustos at melb@nchd.org or call 970-867-4918 x2262.

Holyoke Enterprise January 17, 2013