

Southeast Michigan Intentional Food Contamination Event

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In late April, 2016, a local facility contacted law enforcement and FBI about a potential intentional contamination of food products. The reported contamination event occurred April 24, 2016 in an Ann Arbor retail store and video footage showed an individual spraying an unknown substance on the salad bar and hot food bar area.

After the facility discarded potentially contaminated food items and cleaned the area, the establishment contacted law enforcement. On April 26, 2016 the Washtenaw County Public Health Department was notified of the event and further communications with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Communicable Disease Division were made the following day. A sample of discarded food was sent to the MDHHS Bureau of Laboratories to test for bioagents that may be used in an intentional/bioterrorism event. A similar sample was sent to the FBI Laboratory for additional testing.

The following weekend May 1, 2016, FBI released images from the store video and asked the public's help in identifying the individual. Two days later Ann Arbor Police apprehended the individual and were able to collect more information about his attempted food contaminations. During the investigation, the suspect admitted to spraying a mixture of Tomcat brand mouse poison, alcohol-based hand sanitizer and water at three Ann Arbor-based stores: Whole Foods, Meijer and Plum Market. FBI laboratory testing is focused on confirming the reported agent.

On May 3, 2016, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) and MDHHS released a consumer advisory and health alert about the actions of this individual, information about the suspect contaminant, and what to do about potentially contaminated food purchases. Additional information was then released to the public by MDARD and MDHHS listing several other stores this individual had visited recently, a reiteration of the individual's actions, guidance on how to deal with food purchases made at the listed stores, acknowledgements of all the different agencies efforts – Whole Foods, law enforcement, FBI, Washtenaw County Public Health Department, and public – as well as recommendations for food industry employees and consumers to be vigilant and report any suspicious activity (“If you see something, say something”).

That same evening, MDARD food inspectors visited those potentially affected stores to conduct follow-up assessments. Both MDHHS and Washtenaw County Public Health continued to monitor for related reportable conditions and any increases in Emergency Department visits via surveillance systems (MDSS, MSSS) and foodborne illness complaints from the public. A limited number of complaints were reported to the health department, but no significant signals were identified in either surveillance system or from the public.

On May 5, 2016 Kyle Bessemer, 29, was formally charged in Washtenaw County with four felony counts of poisoning food, drink, medicine or water supply, two of them in which property damage occurred. In August 2014 Kyle's mother, Elizabeth Bessemer, petitioned Midland County Probate Court to have her son be hospitalized due to his reluctance to be treated for schizophrenia. The week following his first appearance in Washtenaw County Court, on May 12, 2016, Bessemer appeared in Washtenaw County 14th District Court for a probable cause hearing and consequently was scheduled for a competency hearing.

This investigation of an intentional food contamination event required the joint efforts of several local, state and federal level agencies. It was not only the willingness of the consumer to report suspicious activity to the store, but also the store's efforts to mitigate and report the situation to local law enforcement that put in motion several actions, initiating a joint investigation by the FBI, local public health (Washtenaw County Public Health), and State of Michigan agencies (MDARD, MDHHS), all who have a role in this type of situation. This situation also highlights the continued need for effective communications and development of relationships between partners necessary to respond to any type of threat to the public's health.