

FoodNet Canada Ontario Sentinel Site: Highlights from 2014-2015

Background

In February 2014, the Board of Health reviewed Report No. 017-14 “Health Unit Participation in FoodNet Canada” and endorsed becoming the Ontario sentinel site of Public Health Agency of Canada’s (PHAC) FoodNet Canada (FNC) program. The FNC Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed in May 2014, based on the recommendation of the Finance and Facilities Committee (see Report Nos. 016-14FFC and 025-14), formally entering the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) into a three-year agreement with PHAC. Under the terms of the agreement, MLHU is responsible for carrying out two of the four components of the FNC program: enhanced follow-up of human cases of food- and water-borne illnesses, and purchasing retail food items of interest to be sent to a laboratory so they can be tested for infectious agents that can cause illnesses. This report provides an update from the first fiscal year (to March 31, 2015) of the three-year agreement.

Progress in 2014-2015

Between signing the MOA in May 2014 and the fiscal year end on March 31, 2015, a number of key operational milestones were achieved, including:

- Hiring a Site Coordinator, who began in June 2014;
- Commencing the retail sampling component of the program as of July 2014;
- Enhancing and developing collaborative partnerships with local and provincial laboratories;
- Enhancing and developing paper and electronic data collection tools to support enhanced follow-up of human cases of food- and water-borne illness, and providing staff education about using these tools, to ensure collection of high quality data;
- Establishing secure methods to receive additional laboratory testing results for human cases of food- and water-borne illness, and to transmit anonymized case information to PHAC;
- Organizing the official program launch in October 2014, attended by key local, provincial and federal stakeholders;
- Establishing a sentinel site steering committee with representation from MLHU, PHAC, Public Health Ontario (PHO), the Public Health Ontario Laboratory (PHOL), and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA);
- Participating in and contributing to a number of PHAC-led meetings involving the FNC British Columbia and Alberta sentinel sites, as well as other collaborators such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) FoodNet program.

Since becoming the FNC Ontario sentinel site, program staff at MLHU have realized a number of benefits through participation in the program, including:

- Collaborating with an expanded network of local, provincial and federal public health partners, and food and water safety experts;
- Enhancing information sharing with key partners through the FNC Ontario sentinel site steering committee;
- Participating in new learning and knowledge sharing activities, such as collaborative meetings with PHAC partners; and
- Enhancing knowledge and practice through access to evidence-based research and knowledge exchange activities.

An early success of participation in the enhanced and integrated surveillance program of FNC was realized in the summer and autumn of 2014. At the time, there was an increase across the province (including cases from Middlesex-London) in the number of people confirmed to have a specific type of *Salmonella* infection. As part of the FNC program, MLHU was purchasing food items of interest so that they could be tested for infectious agents known to cause illnesses. Testing these food items revealed that frozen chicken nuggets and strips were testing positive for the same type of *Salmonella* associated with the increase in human cases. Further, one particular manufacturer accounted for higher percentage of the results for that type of *Salmonella* than other manufacturers. Not only did the integration of enhanced case information and the testing of retail food items significantly contribute to a provincial outbreak investigation, it led to collaboration and action with the manufacturer by provincial and federal partners to address the problem.

Overall, the first fiscal year of participation in FNC is felt to have been a great success. Not only were benefits realized locally and provincially, PHAC was pleased with the progress and quality of effort delivered by MLHU as the FNC Ontario sentinel site.

Next steps in 2015-2016

MLHU is currently reviewing a draft of the *2014 FoodNet Canada Short Report*, which is expected to be published in summer 2015. It will contain findings from the 2014 calendar year from all FNC sentinel sites and will be the first FNC report containing data from the Middlesex-London region as the Ontario sentinel site.

Now fully operational as the FNC Ontario sentinel site, the second fiscal year of participation will focus on continuing to collect high quality data, and continuing to make important contributions to activities aimed at reducing the burden of food- and water-borne illnesses at the local, provincial and federal levels.