

Many N. Ky. food trucks lack licenses

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By Mark Hansel

Rolling restaurants are making their way into Northern Kentucky more frequently, parking temporarily to sell their beverages and snacks – a convenience to people rushed through their work day.

But the Northern Kentucky Health Department is concerned that many of these mobile food vendors are riding without a permit to sell food.

Lora Castor, of Florence, started her Perk'n Up Coffee business about four months ago – after she got her permit.

She sells a variety of coffees, frappes, smoothies, prepackaged pastries and muffins. She also makes fresh crepes to order.

"I service most of the smaller colleges in Northern Kentucky and some doctor's offices and other office buildings," Castor said. "I do a little bit of industrial, but not much."

Castor's business gets a thumbs-up from the health department, but many similar food vendors do not.

"Mobile food vendors don't have a fixed location so they go to these places, they set up fairly quickly, they serve quickly and then they are off to their next stop" said Ted Talley, food program manager for the NKY Health Department. "That has really allowed (many of) them to circumvent the permitting process."

The Health Department is fighting back: Operation Chuckwagon, started with a \$5,000 grant from the Network of Public Health Institutes and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, will be largely used to stake out facilities frequented by the trucks – and check for permits.

The serve-and-go nature of the trucks makes it difficult to determine just how many unlicensed vendors visit the four counties covered by the Northern Kentucky Health Department.

"Our sample size is relatively small, but just doing some spot-checks out in the field we estimated only about 25 percent of the vehicles are properly permitted," Talley said. "We are going to have to go out into these areas and see why that is. Initially we will seek education and compliance, but after that it could lead to court action."

As of July 1, only six food trucks had permits to operate in the region. Of them, two were licensed for full-service food and the others could only offer prepackaged food items.

Since that time, four more have been brought up to code, two of which prepare food.

The cost of a permit is \$27 a year for a mobile retailer that sells prepackaged food items and \$120 annually for trucks that prepare food on board. Because the permit cost is relatively low, Talley thinks there are other reasons truck owners are not in compliance.

Vendors who prepare food are required to meet many of the same standards as restaurants and that can be challenging.

"We consider them a kitchen on wheels, so there are more structural requirements that help ensure proper food-handling and techniques," Talley said. "Vendors that are selling prepackaged just need to control proper holding temperatures, but for those that are preparing food, it's a little bit more elaborate set-up."

Requirements for those businesses include a three-compartment sink, a separate hand sink and waste and supply tanks that meet plumbing approval. That's a lot to install in a food truck.

Talley said some vendors may not even know they are doing anything wrong.

"Part of it could be ignorance, because they think that if they are permitted in Ohio or Indiana, they are allowed to come into Kentucky," Talley said. "In doing our spot checks, we've had vendors preparing food whose units simply wouldn't qualify, so we had to steer them to becoming a retailer."

Talley emphasized that there are no concerns about trucks that frequent festivals and other community events.

"All of those vehicles are inspected prior to the festival," Talley said.

Castor, who started her business about four months ago, said there are always going to be the ones that do not comply.

"Eventually more of the ones that do play by the rules will open up, and they will do more inspections and it will weed itself out," Castor said. "Customers will see which trucks are following the rules."

Castor opened her truck after she lost her job at a local school – a situation Talley said could be a reason for the increase in vendors.

"Maybe it is the economy," Talley said. "I've been receiving a lot of calls about mobile food vending, so there is definitely a spike in interest."

Suzanne Deatherage, director of marketing for Beckfield College on Spiral Drive in Florence, said the food trucks are convenient, but she is glad the health department has stepped up compliance efforts.

"We're not big enough to have our own cafeteria here, so to have them come on campus with hot offerings is a fabulous addition," Deatherage said.

Talley said checking out the vendor is probably the best advice he can give to business owners who allow food trucks on their property.

"By only allowing properly permitted food vendors on their property, it reduces the risk of food-borne illnesses to employees and will ultimately save them money," Talley said.