

# Backgrounder: Food Safety Grading System and Excellence Program Group Meetings

## Meeting Purpose

The Government of Alberta is seeking input on two potential initiatives aimed at improving food safety within food establishments across the province. Building on previous engagement with internal and external stakeholders in spring 2025, we are now gathering more detailed perspectives on the potential initiatives outlined below.

In follow up to the written feedback provided by your association/organization, the Government of Alberta is holding small virtual group meetings to:

- Build on input received through written submissions regarding the potential implementation of a food safety inspection grading system ("Grading System") or a food safety culture excellence recognition program ("Excellence Program"),
- Explore strategies to engage your membership in upcoming engagement opportunities related to the Grading System and Excellence Program, and
- Discuss your association's/organization's interest in future engagement opportunities related to the Grading System or Excellence Program, and potentially other recommendations of the Food Safety and Licensed Facility-Based Child Care Review Panel (Review Panel).

## Background

In response to the 2023 outbreak of Shiga toxin producing *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) O157:H7 in multiple licensed child care facilities in Calgary linked to a shared kitchen, the Government of Alberta-appointed Food Safety and Licensed Facility-Based Child Care Review Panel (Review Panel) submitted a report in June 2024 with recommendations to strengthen food safety within the province. The Review Panel submitted its final report in June 2024. As part of the implementation of the Review Panel's recommendations, the Government of Alberta is considering implementing a Grading System, or alternatively, an Excellence Recognition Program.

### Food Safety Inspection Grading System ("Grading System")

- The Review Panel recommended the introduction of a food safety inspection grading system, requiring food establishments to visibly post their grade.
- A grading system typically requires mandatory participation. Grades could be represented as symbols, scores or letters or based on the establishment's compliance with food safety legislation.
- Mandatory posting of grades increases transparency and accountability but poses a risk that the public may misinterpret grades due to limited familiarity with Alberta's public health inspection system. Additionally, a simplified symbol or grade may be insufficient to represent context, intent or activities of an establishment.
- Grading System examples include [Toronto DineSafe Model](#), [Los Angeles County Food Safety Grading Program](#), and [New York City's Restaurant Grading](#).

### Food Safety Culture Excellence Program ("Excellence Program")

- An opt-in Excellence Program is being considered as an alternative to a mandatory Grading System, to acknowledge and recognize Alberta food establishments who demonstrate food safety culture and exceed basic food safety regulation compliance.

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Food Safety culture is the shared knowledge, values, skills, and behaviors within all levels of an organization that create and maintain a safe food environment. A strong or positive food safety culture means everyone in the organization makes food safety a daily priority.

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- Anticipated benefits of an excellence program to participants may include:

- Excellence awards for public display,
- Reputational advantage, potentially increasing customer trust and patronage, and
- Improved food safety and hygiene practices among staff.
- Potential program eligibility requirements may include, but are not limited to:
  - Being a licensed commercial food establishment in Alberta,
  - Holding a valid Food Handling Permit for at least 12 months, and
  - Maintaining a food safety compliance record for the past 12 months.
- Measures of positive food safety culture may include:
  - Written commitment to positive food safety culture from all staff, management and owners posted in a location visible to clients within the facility,
  - Employee illness policy,
  - Commitment to an ongoing education and training plan for all staff and volunteers who handle and serve food,
  - Internal food safety documentation/instructions, including corrective actions as necessary (e.g. cleaning schedule, temperature records, pest control),
  - Clear roles and accountabilities that define/action the involvement of all team members, including volunteers and parents/guardians in licensed child care facilities, in the food safety system,
  - Processes for safe and constructive feedback,
  - Internal audit documentation (e.g. cleanliness, hygiene, storage practices),
  - Action response plans that address results of internal and external audits,
  - Evaluation of customer complaints and documentation of corrective actions, and
  - Policies and practices for recognition of good food safety practices.