

NEA will step up enforcement of public-hygiene standards

I THANK all letter-writers and journalists of *my paper* who have commented on the importance of maintaining high standards of **public hygiene** in our hawker centres following the severe incident of food poisoning traced to a stall at the Geylang Serai Temporary Market.

We, at NEA, are deeply saddened by this episode which saw more than 150 people falling ill, many acutely, with two losing their lives. Our hearts are with the affected people and the grieving families, to whom we have extended our deepest condolences. The outpouring of concern rightfully shows the widespread sympathy we share for them, and underscores the high standards we expect from our markets and food centres.

▣ Maintaining good hygiene standards

NEA has the overall responsibility for ensuring high standards of public health and hygiene in Singapore. We would like to assure the public that NEA will strive to uphold these high standards.

The current system for upholding public hygiene – comprising legislation, surveillance, enforcement and public education – has served us well. The number of food-poisoning cases in Singapore is very low. In the last three years, there has been an average of only four food-poisoning incidents a year, even though we have 5,600 hawker stalls across 106 hawker centres.

▣ Grading of stalls

The grading scheme, introduced in 1997, was intended to moti-

vate licensees to improve their personal and food hygiene, and the upkeep of their premises.

All stalls that are graded and allowed to operate meet the basic hygiene requirements. The grading scheme seeks to differentiate and recognise those who have made greater efforts to improve and sustain the cleanliness and hygiene of their operations.

By making the grades public, it was hoped that consumers' choice could also encourage hawkers to strive for higher standards. NEA, on its part, also works actively with stallholders to encourage them to improve, by paying more attention to those with lower grades. We facilitate upgrading courses to teach food handlers how to raise standards.

Food stalls in hawker centres that are graded "A" and "B" are inspected every eight weeks, while stalls graded "C" and "D" are inspected more frequently: every six weeks. NEA uses a **demerit-points system** to penalise food handlers for any lapses in maintaining good personal and food hygiene. When a food handler accumulates 12 demerit points in a year, his licence will be suspended for two weeks. This is how we keep unhygienic stalls from operating.

This regime has led to a significant improvement in food-hygiene levels in Singapore. Over the years, the proportion of grade "A" and "B" stalls has increased from 46 per cent in 2002 to 86 per cent last year. The remaining 14 per cent of stalls are graded "C" and they meet hygiene requirements.

The grading and demerit-points system, together with the regime of regular inspections, have helped to keep the incidence of food poisoning low.

Nonetheless, food-poisoning incidents can occur in any food establishment, regardless of its grading, if there are lapses in personal hygiene.

Overall, hygiene standards at hawker centres have also improved through the Government's Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme (HUP). Since 2001, a total of 72 centres have been upgraded with better facilities and toilets, among other improvements. The remaining 30 or so centres will be upgraded by 2012.

▣ Cleanliness of Geylang Serai Temporary Market

While markets and hawker centres are being upgraded, grass-root organisations and their advisers can choose to have a temporary market which is not provided for under HUP. If they choose to do so, they will be responsible for maintaining NEA standards of cleanliness at the temporary market. However, NEA will **intervene** if it assesses the need to do so, in the interest of public health.

In the case of Geylang Serai Market, the Kampong Ubi Citizens' Consultative Committee decided to build and manage the temporary market. Despite the best efforts of the Temporary Market Management Committee to implement its cleaning regime and tackle its rat-infestation problem, the problem persisted.

NEA should have moved in earlier to address this problem firmly. Sustained efforts with our assistance and enforcement procedures have now led to a marked improvement. We will continue to require the management committee to sustain ongoing

cleaning and pest-control efforts.

▣ Greater vigilance

In future, NEA will be more vigilant. We will step up efforts to enforce higher standards of public hygiene at all food outlets. We will conduct more refresher training on food and personal hygiene for stallholders and food handlers. We will also tighten our procedures for ensuring the timely issuing and display of up-to-date grading labels.

To emphasise the need for good hygiene practices, and to enhance the understanding of the overall system, NEA will step up engagement with market managements and operators of food establishments. We are also looking into increasing public-awareness efforts, so as to involve consumers in the system of maintaining high levels of public hygiene at all times.

NEA will improve the current system by taking into account the useful suggestions we have received. We thank everyone for their valuable **feedback**.

We continue to welcome views at contact_NEA@nea.gov.sg and 1800-CALL-NEA (1800-2255-632).

Mr Andrew Tan
Chief Executive Officer
National Environment Agency

HELPPDESK 我的字典

▣ Public hygiene: 公共卫生
gōng gòng wèi shēng

▣ Demerit-points system:
记分制度 jì fēn zhì dù

▣ Intervene: 介入 jiè rù

▣ Feedback: 反馈 fǎn kuì