

Extension system ends E. coli silence, says meals served safely

By Eric Fleischauer Staff Writer | Updated 2 months ago

In its first public acknowledgement that it had a role in an event that health officials suspect led to illnesses, including to a man who later died, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System said late Monday it followed health and safety regulations when serving meals May 30.

At least 19 people reported becoming ill after attending an ACES-hosted luncheon at Bridge Builders Church on Beltline Road. A private lab has confirmed three cases of E. coli and salmonella in the ongoing investigation.

Clarence Hampton, 71, died six days after the event. According to a family member, Hampton's doctor said he tested positive for the E. coli bacteria. Autopsy results have not been released.

"The Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Program Unit of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System under its Successful Aging Initiative was the sponsor of an SAI Conference held in Morgan County on May 30, 2014," according to the unsigned statement ACES provided to The Daily. "As is customary, meals were served during the conference with strict adherence to all procedures and regulations for health and safety."

The ACES statement said it is cooperating with health authorities.

"Over 300 persons attended the conference and were served meals," the ACES statement said. "We have been made aware of two complaints that were filed with the Health Department alleging food poisoning emanating from the event."

According to Michael Tubbs, executive director of Community Action Partnership in Decatur, a member of his staff contacted ACES a week after the event to report that some from CAPNA who attended the luncheon were getting sick. Tubbs said at least two dozen CAPNA employees and volunteers became sick, including Hampton, who worked as a senior companion.

"We were not responsible for the event, but we are responsible for our volunteers," Tubbs said Monday. "I am disappointed that others did not address this early on, when they could have and should have."

Decatur lawyer Jimmy Adams said he represents Hampton's estate, but he has been unsuccessful in obtaining any specifics on the luncheon from ACES.

Adams said it was his understanding the luncheon was catered, but he had not confirmed that fact.

The Daily filed a public records request Monday with Alabama Disease Control and Prevention in Montgomery seeking the name of the caterer and the state's policy on releasing such information during illness investigations.

Dr. Mary McIntyre, assistant health officer with Disease Control and Prevention, said this morning via e-mail that the department was aware of a death following the luncheon, but that because of "late reporting resulting in missing critical data," there is no way to confirm if the death is connected to the meal.

Though the health department won't release the name of the caterer, McIntyre said its facility has been visited by health department employees.

According to the state health department's annual reports, cases of both E. coli and salmonella have risen in the last decade.

In 2003, there were 17 confirmed cases of E. coli and 802 cases of salmonella; in 2013, there were 52 cases of E. coli and 1,089 cases of salmonella.

Adams said he has not researched the issue, but ACES may have some claim to governmental immunity for any negligence on its part.

"I'm wary of that, but that's all out there to sort out," Adams said. "Right now I'm just trying to get a scorecard on what happened."

According to its website, ACES "operates as the primary outreach organization for the land-grant functions of Alabama A&M and Auburn *universities*."

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Staff writer Mary Sell contributed to this article.

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