

Potato salad likely source of deadly botulism outbreak

By [Mark Ferencsik](#) *The Columbus Dispatch* • Tuesday April 28, 2015 1:18 PM

State health officials said the source of a deadly botulism outbreak is likely potato salad made with home-canned potatoes served at a Lancaster church potluck. On Monday, Pastor Bill Pitts of the Cross Pointe Free Will Baptist Church said members have not been pointing fingers. "We're just going to be moving forward from where we're at," he said. "We can't look at why as much as, what can we do now." The conclusion that the source of the botulism was the home-canned potatoes came after laboratory tests and interviews with people who attended the April 19 potluck.

Sietske de Fijter, chief of the Bureau of Infectious Diseases for the state, said health officials narrowed the likely food culprits by interviewing nearly everyone who became ill, as well as those who didn't, at the potluck. The common denominator, she said, was homemade potato salad. Lab testing confirmed the presence of botulism.

The number of confirmed cases of botulism, 21, hasn't changed since Sunday, said Cassie Bala, Ohio Department of Health spokeswoman. One of the confirmed cases was Kim Shaw, 55, of Rushville, who attended the potluck and died last Tuesday. Shaw's death certificate in Fairfield County lists the cause as pending. The number of suspected cases remains at 10. Eleven people were hospitalized as of Tuesday afternoon. Patients are being treated with an antitoxin provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

More than 20 food samples were taken and tested, including home-canned items. Preliminary tests last week showed that six food samples taken from the potluck — three of potato salad, one potato salad with egg, one macaroni and cheese and one spaghetti pasta salad — tested positive for the botulism toxin. Officials said it appeared the potato salad with egg was homemade. The samples were taken from one or two trash bags with other food, so cross-contamination was likely.

Close to 80 people attended the post-service meal at the church, Pastor Pitts said during an interview Monday at The Dispatch. He spent Monday afternoon and evening visiting church members at four Columbus hospitals. "Anyone I see, they're more concerned about me than anyone else," said Pitts, his voice calm and steady. "They're focused on each other." Pitts said some remain on ventilators. A husband and wife remain hospitalized, he said. He estimated at least 12 people have been released from hospitals. He remembered what happened last week when he began learning that something was dreadfully wrong. Pitts received the first text about the illnesses from church members after arriving in Chicago on Monday to visit an uncle with cancer. A member had gone to the hospital with symptoms that Pitts described "as close to a mini-stroke." He said he contacted a church elder early Tuesday morning. Around daybreak, Pitts started receiving text after text that church members were heading to Fairfield Medical Center. "My phone was blowing up," he said. He raced back to Lancaster from Chicago. After he entered Ohio on I-70 he received word that Shaw had died. Pitts had hugged Shaw two days before, on the Sunday when the church hosted the potluck. "I got off to fill up, pulled up to the pump, and cried my heart out," said Pitts, the church's pastor for a decade. "It was a terrible, terrible thing that happened." Pitts recalled what he spoke about at the April 19 church service before the potluck. He talked about life's mundane moments, but that everyone has a defining moment in their lives.

"What has happened this week has been our defining moment," he said. "It's been my defining moment too." He said he has been heartened by support of so many, not only from local churches posting encouraging messages on signs outside their places of worship, but from as far away as Ireland, Ukraine and Japan. "Everyone can identify with a potluck," he said. "They know it can happen anywhere." Pitts, 62, did not eat at the potluck because he is on a diet. "There was nothing there I could eat," he said. The church hosts potlucks about every three or four months, he said. "It's biblical," Pitts said. "It's breaking bread together." He described this past Sunday's church service as extremely emotional, with close to 160 people attending. He called Shaw "just a beautiful person inside, just so kind." Shaw's service was also on Sunday. "Three hours after the service, and we were ready to have a funeral." A fund has been set up to help families affected by the outbreak. Donations can be sent to the Cross Pointe Family Relief Fund at the church, 657 E. Main St., Lancaster, Ohio, 43130, or dropped off at For Goodness Sake, 647 E. Main St., Lancaster, Ohio 43130, or at Fairfield National Bank branches.

SOURCE: <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2015/04/27/Home-canned-potatoes-tied-to-botulism-outbreak.html>