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Share Your FSIS Stories and Snapshots!

Send articles and photos to Beacon@usda.gov. Articles must be original works that have been cleared by your supervisor and contain the author's name and contact information. Submissions should not exceed 250 words. *The Beacon* editorial staff will edit submissions for content and length.

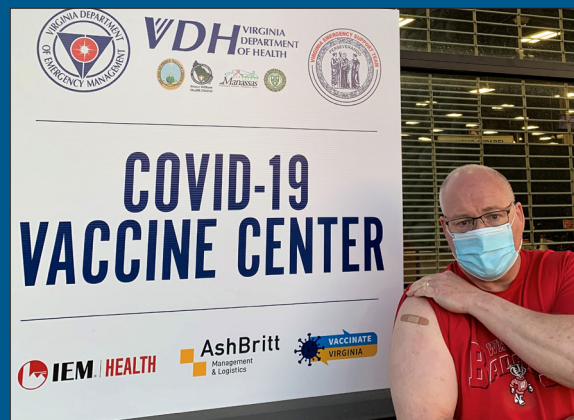
High-resolution photos must be submitted as a separate attachment in .jpg format. Provide a media release form for photos of individuals under 18 years of age.

The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

April 2021

On March 30, FSIS Administrator Paul Kiecker went to a vaccine center located in Manassas, Virginia, and received an inoculation against the COVID-19 virus. He said, "I decided to get vaccinated to protect myself, my family, FSIS and USDA colleagues, and the general population. I encourage everyone to get vaccinated, as quickly as the opportunity presents itself, and do their part to put this pandemic in the past." Photo by Jan Kiecker, Paul Kiecker's wife.



FSIS Vaccination Heroes Do Their Part for America

By Felicia Thompson, OPACE

The U.S. is grappling with a national emergency. As of April 5, more than 560,000 Americans have died because of COVID-19. To combat the spread of the virus, a national strategy was developed to get vaccines distributed as quickly as possible. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is leading the effort to administer doses at community vaccination centers across the country, and they identified veterinarians as one of the groups that could perform inoculations, making them "Vaccination Heroes."

FEMA activated Emergency Support Function #11, which protects agricultural and natural resources in a national emergency and is led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). On Feb. 9, then-Acting USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) Administrator (now Deputy Administrator) Terri Nintemann sent an all-employee email calling for Vaccination Heroes, volunteers with clinical training, to support vaccination efforts in three states that requested federal support.

To date, the USDA has deployed more than 749 personnel, 29 of whom were FSIS employees, including a microbiologist, a consumer safety inspector, and up to 13 veterinarians at a given time. Volunteers must be vaccinated (and will be

provided with the vaccine if they have not already been vaccinated). They also would receive vaccine-specific training, although they are clinically trained already. Those deployed to Nevada and Oklahoma had to serve up to 30 days and expect to work up to 12 hours a day. Those staffing the Maryland location had to reside in the local-commuting area and committed to working extended hours.

OFO District Veterinary Medical Specialist in the Chicago District Dr. Kelly Welin staffed the Maryland site. She said, "I wanted to help officials get the public vaccinated as quickly as possible, so people are protected. Car after car brings people who are eager and excited to get the vaccine and are so grateful of all the personnel that are making it possible."



On March 11, Dr. Samantha Talley, an OFO relief supervisory public health veterinarian assigned to the Dallas District (pictured, right), vaccinates a woman in Poteau, Oklahoma. Talley was deployed to vaccinate Oklahomans at a community center where the local health department set up a COVID-19 vaccine clinic. In 26 days, Talley administered 624 vaccines. Photo by David Seeley.

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The Beacon

PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH FOOD SAFETY

The Beacon Mission Statement

The Beacon newsletter is prepared by the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education to provide relevant mission critical information to all FSIS employees. The Beacon provides employees information about the Agency's proposed regulations, policies and programs; training opportunities; and important employee welfare initiatives to connect employees to the mission and build a cohesive community. The Beacon enables employees to stay up-to-date with the latest events and see the Agency's mission executed in action.

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Deadline for submissions is the first day of the previous month.

Jun. issue – due May 15 Jul. issue – due Jun. 1
Aug. issue – due Jul. 1 Sep. issue – due Aug. 1

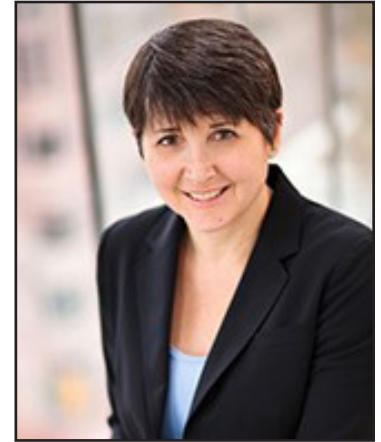
Articles will be considered for publication in the order in which they are received. If your article is time sensitive, please indicate that in the subject line of your submission email. Due to the number of submissions received each month and the limited amount of space, we unfortunately cannot guarantee that your submission will be used.

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Welcome to Sandra Eskin: New Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety

On March 24, 2021, Sandra Eskin started as the Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety. She comes to USDA from the Pew Charitable Trusts, where she served as the Project Director for Food Safety. Prior to joining Pew, she was a public policy consultant to consumer and public interest organizations, providing strategic and policy advice on a range of consumer protection issues, including food safety, dietary supplement safety and food and drug labeling and advertising. Eskin held the roles of Federal Government Staff Attorney and Legislative Representative for the Consumer Federation of America and served as Deputy Director of the Produce Safety Project, a Pew initiative at Georgetown University. She has also served on numerous federal advisory committees. Eskin received her bachelor's degree from Brown University and her juris doctor from the University of California Hastings College of the Law.



"Sandra's deep experience in food safety will strengthen USDA's dedication to ensuring a safe, secure food supply for consumers and help to protect the safety of federal meat inspectors and workers throughout the food chain," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack.

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FSIS Vaccination Heroes

FSIS employees are devoted to public health, but also to supporting each other. While volunteers are on the frontlines helping to save American lives, their colleagues are helping cover their food safety duties. Read more about our [Vaccination Heroes](#) on the FSIS Employees webpage.

Getting your COVID-19 Vaccine? Show us your shot!

The COVID-19 vaccination is an important tool to help us end the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the vaccine supply is currently limited, the federal government is working to make vaccines widely available for everyone at no cost.

When you go to get your COVID-19 vaccine, ask if you can snap a photo right before, during or after your COVID-19 vaccine and show us your shot! High quality photos should be sent as .jpg files to Beacon@usda.gov along with your name, location and caption. We're all excited to see these critical vaccines reaching FSIS employees.

Administrator's Column

In his February 25 video message to USDA employees, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack reiterated that beating the COVID-19 pandemic is our top priority. USDA and FSIS are taking action across the country to support the federal government's response to the pandemic.



Paul Kiecker

USDA is coordinating with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to put boots on the ground and shots in arms. FSIS veterinarians and those with medical training have been deployed to Maryland, Nevada and Oklahoma where USDA personnel have already administered thousands of COVID-19 vaccines. FSIS employees have volunteered to work long days with limited time off, and those in Nevada and Oklahoma are completing 30-day assignments away from their homes and families. Numerous others have supported this mission by helping to get our personnel into the field once trained to administer the vaccine. The Office of Human Resources, Financial Services Center, and Federal Travel Agency Administrators have quickly responded to the sudden need for new accounting codes, travel cards, travel authorizations and pay and benefit waivers. At the same time, other FSIS personnel are ensuring that these volunteers' everyday vital work continues to get done during this deployment.

While vaccination is an important part of the [National Strategy](#) to end COVID-19, we will have to continue using all the tools in our toolbox to end the pandemic. Every time you wear a mask, wash your hands or practice social distancing, you are doing your part. These prevention measures are also part of the USDA's detailed, data-driven [COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan](#). USDA and FSIS will continue to prioritize the health and safety of our employees and ensure that you have access to the protective equipment and resources that you need to do your job as safely as possible.

I'm proud of the important work that FSIS employees do every day. And right now, I'm especially proud to see FSIS employees stepping up and taking action to help end the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deputy Administrator's Column

As technology and the internet have become a part of our daily lives, they have also become important tools FSIS employees need to do their jobs. Over the last decade, FSIS has been moving away from paper-based processes and procedures, and toward electronic systems. This month



Terri Nintemann

marks ten years since FSIS implemented the Public Health Information System (PHIS), a huge step in expanding our use of technology. PHIS is our foundational computer-based system for verifying that establishments meet regulatory requirements, and it is used across the Agency.

FSIS personnel need to have efficient internet access to receive their scheduled inspection tasks in PHIS and to record the results of the inspection tasks. Internet service is a necessary utility — like lighting, heating and laundry services — that establishments should provide as a regulatory condition of receiving inspection. FSIS proposed an amendment to our regulations to require establishments with an internet connection to provide access to FSIS employees so they can conduct and record inspection verification activities. The amendment would apply to establishments that receive regular and voluntary inspection services, but not require establishments without internet access to purchase or to upgrade services not sufficient for FSIS' use.

Simultaneously, the Agency has deployed laptops or tablets (eDevices) for FSIS employees at more than 240 establishments. We are also deploying additional eDevices to reduce the time employees have to wait to use an eDevice by making one available for every two FSIS employees. The additional eDevices began shipping out in February 2021 and will be fully delivered by June 2021. They are necessary for the field to access notices, directives, training materials and WebTA, so using them should be a part of field personnel's regular activities.

The eDevices are just one example of working hard to ensure that how we work uses evolving technology. We should all have access to tools help to work as efficiently and effectively as possible.

New FSIS Website Launched

On March 3, our new [FSIS website](#) went live. This significant modernization effort is based on input from employees across FSIS, and on feedback from external partners and stakeholders. The site better represents and reflects the critical work all of you do on a daily basis and will help ensure that food safety is more transparent and accessible to everyone. The redesign is a significant shift in how we communicate — not just with external stakeholders, but also with our current and prospective employees. Check out the resources available in the new [Employees](#) section of the site and the [Careers](#) section of the new site. To provide feedback, questions or to note issues, please email FSISFeedback@usda.gov.

Keeping FSIS Employees Safe from COVID-19

By Leo O'Drudy, OPACE

USDA is doing its part to help America fight and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. FSIS personnel, in particular, have been going the extra mile to keep America's food supply safe and abundant during the pandemic. And as we employees help others, USDA also puts a top priority on our own safety as well.

That's why USDA released the USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan in February, available through the FSIS [COVID Pandemic Resources](#) page. "The health and safety of our employees continues to be our top priority. It is important that all employees are aware of the new workplace safety guidance recently issued by the Department," said FSIS Deputy Administrator Terri Nintemann in an email to all FSIS employees on Feb. 22. The plan is comprehensive and covers all USDA workplaces and facilities, including FSIS-regulated establishments. Previously existing USDA re-opening playbooks have been replaced. Updates will be distributed via the [USDA Intranet](#) (eAuthentication required), and employees should also watch for emails with new information from USDA and FSIS.

USDA's plan is a response both to the President's Executive Order on Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing, and to the memorandum issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a result of that Executive Order. In line with the OMB memorandum, which states that "the Administration is committed to taking a safe, cautious, iterative, data-driven approach," the plan covers not only when and how USDA will update its plans and communicate them to employees

(including unions) and other stakeholders, but also goes into detail about health, safety and workplace operations. From telework and remote work, to facemasks and other personal protective gear, to testing, contact tracing, travel, symptom monitoring and more, USDA's guidance follows the OMB's Agency Model Safety Principles, adapted to USDA needs and is consistent with current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The plan sets up a COVID-19 coordination team within USDA, which will meet biweekly to review and revise plans, oversee compliance, work with local authorities and others, make decisions on details and more. The team includes a representative from each mission area, Office of Human Resources Management, executive leadership, Office of the General Counsel, occupational safety and health, and two public health experts.

The monthly town hall phone calls with FSIS leadership are an important way to remain up to date on various topics, including workplace safety. The FSIS Intranet and the public-facing web page at www.usda.gov/coronavirus and FSIS COVID Pandemic Resources page mentioned above are other useful resources to get the latest information.

FSIS Employee Connections

FSIS Employee Connections is employee-centric and features the personalities that make up FSIS through employee profiles, individual and team accomplishments, original visual and literary works, and on- and off-duty activities, such as performing inspiring community service. In April, we plan to feature stories about family traditions, favorite recipes, or fun hobbies.

For consideration for the June 2021 issue, send cleared articles and high-resolution .jpg-format photographs (that adhere to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's social distancing guidelines and feature properly worn personal protective equipment) to FSISConnections@usda.gov by May 1. Include a detailed caption about what is happening; date and location of activity (e.g., city, state, plant number, building, etc.); names, titles, and program areas (e.g., OFO Des Moines District, OIEA, OPPD) for each individual. Please send questions, or requests for forms to use a minor in a photo, to FSISConnections@usda.gov.

David Vasquez Cooks Up Morale for His Team

By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

David Vasquez, supervisory consumer safety inspector (SCSI) at Establishment (Est.) M675 in Hereford, Texas, has been with FSIS for 28 years. He supervises 20 food inspectors (FI), 4 consumer safety inspectors (CSI) and 2 intermittent FIs. He also juggles a variety of tasks. In addition to ensuring regulatory compliance, he mentors, manages training and resolves staffing issues, and then there's administrative items such as time and attendance sheets, workers compensation forms and travel vouchers. He also spends time recruiting new FIs and CSIs. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, he attended community and university job fairs to recruit new hires; now, he participates in virtual job fairs.

Vasquez's supervisor, Supervisory Public Health Veterinarian Dr. Jonathan Klemme, said, "Mr. Vasquez's dedication to the mission is evident in his willingness to take on numerous special projects that wouldn't normally fall under the scope of an SCSI's duties, including participating in hiring events in the Texas Panhandle, assisting during the Frontline Supervisor's absence in performing in-plant performance system reviews outside of his duty station and doing walk-throughs of new plants applying for a grant of inspection. Mr. Vasquez has worked closely with the Dallas District Office and Human Resources, coordinating the onboarding of many newly hired inspectors for both his own duty station and other duty stations in the area. Through these special projects, Mr. Vasquez has grown his repertoire of abilities and helped the circuit, district and program area with his efforts."

Maintaining Team Morale

Passionate about his work, Vasquez considers it an honor to be a public servant who helps ensure our nation's food supply is safe. He likes to lead by example and to mentor FIs and CSIs. In the team environment at the plant, he says maintaining morale is important. "I treat people the way I want to be treated. I also like to cook, so sometimes I will I cook ribs or brisket to share with the team. I also cook breakfast every Saturday. Even though they may be working on a Saturday, the inspectors look forward to breakfast — it brightens up their day," said Vasquez.

The recent pandemic has changed the way his team works, but the Saturday breakfasts continue. Said Vasquez, "With COVID-19, our workforce faced distinct challenges, but they worked to ensure the production lines would not stop or slow down. I applaud all dedicated FSIS workers who showed up to work every day and kept our establishments operating and our food supply safe."



SCSI David Vasquez observes carcasses at Est. M675 in Hereford, Texas. Photo by Jose Garcia, OFO Dallas District.

Recognition for a Job Well Done

At FSIS' 2020 Administrator's Awards for Excellence and Under Secretary's Awards Ceremony, Vasquez was recognized for his service and awarded an Honorable Mention for Leader of the Year (In-Plant). The nomination noted, "Mr. Vasquez has gone above and beyond in developing the inspection teams at two large beef slaughter establishments in the [Texas] Panhandle by noticeably improving morale, addressing potential issues with inspection technique before it

becomes a food safety issue, noticing and addressing developing trends in his assigned establishments before they develop into noncompliance and tirelessly working to develop a positive working relationship with industry." While humbled by the award, Vasquez acknowledged it is nice to be recognized.

Of the four [FSIS core values](#) — Accountable, Collaborative, Solutions-Oriented and Empowered — Vasquez says he most relates to Solutions-Oriented. If he identifies a food safety issue on the slaughter floor, he immediately addresses the issue, then follows up with a meeting at the end of the shift or during company breaks to further emphasize the correct behavior. He also enjoys recognizing others for a job well done. Once, the establishment was scheduled to slaughter many cysticercosis cattle. Vasquez held a meeting with all in-plant personnel on the shift to apprise them of the situation. The inspectors worked together as a team to make sure the infected cattle were appropriately identified and retained. For the inspectors' efforts, Vasquez nominated them for non-monetary awards, which they received, and he wrote them letters of recognition.

Establishment Inspector to USDA Inspector

Vasquez attended Southwest Texas State University (now known as Texas State University) and studied physical education with the intent of being a high school coach. Plans change, and Vasquez began working in the food industry when he was 21. He served as a quality control (QC) inspector at two "sister" plants in San Carlos and McAllen, Texas, that prepared meals for the military. He quickly moved up the ranks and became QC

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FSIS EMPLOYEE CONNECTIONS



Do Your Part on Stop Food Waste Day and Every Day

By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

In the U.S., over one-third of all available food goes uneaten through loss or waste. To draw attention to this issue, the Compass Group (a global food services company), initiated Stop Food Waste Day in 2017. It is now recognized worldwide as a day to reduce food waste. This year's Stop Food Waste Day is April 28.

Ways to Reduce Food Waste

Before food shopping, check your refrigerator and pantry, then plan meals using food that is about to go bad first. Buy appropriate quantities; don't buy in bulk unless you plan to use the food before it goes bad. When shopping, buy only what you know you'll use and check expiration dates on food items. If there is no date, buy perishable products about 1-2 days before preparation or freeze until ready to use.

At home, store food properly to prevent spoilage. Make sure leftovers and cooked foods are chilled within two hours after cooking. Freeze leftovers for future use. Download and use the FoodKeeper app to help you use food while at peak quality or to know when to use the leftovers.

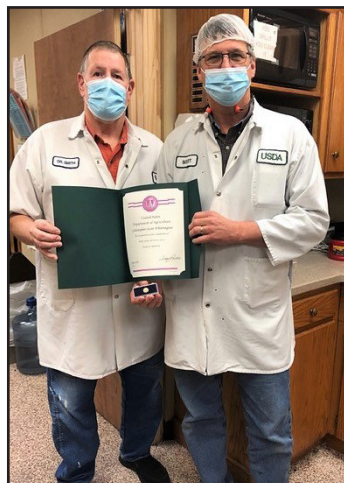
Often, skins on fruits, vegetables and chicken are peeled off and go to waste; don't miss out on these nutrients—eat them! Use browning bananas in a smoothie or in banana bread. Compost spoiled fruits, vegetables, coffee grounds, bread and grain. This reduces the amount of food going into landfills and provides nutrient-rich soil for growing your own fruits and vegetables. USDA and FSIS Offer Solutions

USDA helps address the problem of food waste through [programs, policies and guidance](#) that include tips for consumers and [guidance](#) on how to safely donate food to food banks, pantries, soup kitchens and shelters that help feed families in need. FSIS provides guidance on food product labeling to help reduce food waste by encouraging food manufacturers and retailers to use a "Best if Used By" date label. This approach would decrease confusion regarding labeling, thus reducing the disposal of food that is past the Quality Date but is otherwise safe to eat.

30 Years of Dedication to Public Service and Public Health



Office of Field Operations
Atlanta District Consumer Safety
Inspector Rebecca Cross received her 30-year service certificate and pin for her dedication to FSIS' food safety mission. Cross met this goal in February 2020 but was recently acknowledged. The delay was due to the COVID-19 virus. She is assigned to Establishment P-40, a poultry slaughter plant, in Ellijay, Georgia. Photo courtesy of Ronald Dotson, OFO.



Pictured, from left: Office of Field Operations Jackson District Supervisory Public Health Veterinarian Dr. Tommy Smith recognized Consumer Safety Inspector Scott Whittington with a 30-year pin and a certificate for Whittington's dedicated service to FSIS. Whittington is assigned to Establishment P-247, a New Poultry Inspection System establishment, in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. Photo by Alicia Williams, OFO.