

A plan to improve recruitment and retention of Supervisory Public Health Veterinarians (SPHVs)

February 2017

Executive Summary

FSIS's mission as the premier public health agency in USDA, is to protect consumers by ensuring that meat and poultry are safe and wholesome. To accomplish this, FSIS's number one goal is to ensure that inspection aligns with risks. FSIS has 9600 employees of which Supervisory Public Health Veterinarians (SPHV) and food inspectors (FI) provide meat inspections in federal slaughter establishments.

To reach these food safety goals, FSIS must have a professional leadership workforce that is highly educated and well-trained in science and food safety-related issues to ensure food inspections are conducted correctly, efficiently and effectively; and the food establishment is in compliance with existing regulations and policies. This workforce should be comprised of individuals with bachelor, Master and Doctorate degrees that relate to food safety, especially Doctors of Veterinary Medicine (DVM, VMD) and Masters of Science degree in Food Safety or Public Health. This is because FSIS conducts its food safety inspection duties at the nexus of animal health and public health.

It is critical to the FSIS mission and goals that the SPHVs and FIs workforces are well-staffed, well-trained, and supported. However, FSIS has had a chronically high vacancy level (11%) among SPHVs for many years and the FI vacancy level is often high in some FSIS districts (7-11%). Veterinarians provide mission critical supervision and oversight of slaughter operations and inspections worldwide because of their knowledge of animal diseases, and sanitation. NAFV feels this staffing issue needs to be corrected quickly.

Recruitment of SPHV's by FSIS has not been as effective as needed. FSIS has not made the SPHV position attractive enough to keep more highly-qualified veterinarians employed. There is no mechanism for most SPHVs to use their knowledge outside the slaughter establishments to assist FSIS in policy development and there is an inadequate veterinary career-ladder for most SPHVs who wish to advance within the organization. As a result, this has created an unattractive work environment; a resultant lack of long-term employee fulfillment/satisfaction and/or commitment to the career track and a lack of advancement potential. These issues prevent FSIS from always attracting the best and brightest SPHV's (with leadership desire and potential) to remain with FSIS which damages the future SPHV perception and position.

NAFV SPHV members have developed an SPHV staffing plan for implementation by FSIS. This plan will resolve the perpetual staffing vacancies. It will require a redirection of funds within FSIS and additional funds for USDA to accomplish the staffing elements.

Introduction:

Foodborne illnesses are a burden on public health and contribute significantly to the cost of health care. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that each year foodborne illnesses sicken 48 million Americans (approximately 17% of people in the United States) and lead to 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths.¹

Inspection of meat and other food products help ensure these products are wholesome and safe to eat. The United States has some of the safest foods supply in the world. This was not

always the case and this plan is designed to improve public health through better inspection of meat and meat products.

Inspection of meat and animal products began in the US because of trade restrictions by foreign countries. U.S. producers and packers urged the government to implement an inspection program that would enable them to compete in foreign markets. In 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed the first law requiring inspection of meat products. In 1891, this law was amended to include the inspection and certification of all live cattle and beef intended for exportation. In 1905, there were poor, filthy working conditions in slaughter establishments that posed health threats to meat consumers—that caused a public furor. The Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) became law in 1906. In 2017, that responsibility belongs to the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).ⁱⁱ

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

FSIS's mission as the premier public health agency in USDA, is to protect consumers by ensuring that meat and poultry are safe and wholesome. To accomplish this, FSIS's number one goal is to ensure that inspection aligns with risks. Other FSIS goals include effectively using science to "understand" foodborne illnesses and emerging trends; implement effective policies to respond to risks; develop, maintain, and use innovative methodologies, and processes; and empower employees with training, resources and tools to protect public health. FSIS has 9600 employees of which Public Health Veterinarians and food inspectors (FI) provide meat inspections in federal slaughter establishments.

To reach these food safety goals, FSIS must have a professional leadership workforce that is highly educated and well-trained in science and food safety-related issues to ensure food inspections are conducted correctly, efficiently and effectively; and the food establishment is in compliance with existing regulations and policies. This workforce should be comprised of individuals with bachelor, Master and Doctorate degrees that relate to food safety, especially Doctors of Veterinary Medicine (DVM, VMD) and Masters of Science degree in Food Safety or Public Health. This is because FSIS conducts its food safety inspection duties at the nexus of animal health and public health.

SPHVs, food inspectors, and consumer safety inspectors are the central and essential part of the FSIS workforce serving on the front lines. The SPHVs (because of their overall food safety and animal health education and knowledge) are responsible for providing oversight, supervision, making decisions, and ensuring that all FSIS regulations and policies are in compliance within the establishments. SPHV education includes at least two years of pre-veterinary college courses and four years of in-depth medical college courses including animal health and food safety related courses such as: pathology, toxicology, comparative anatomy, microbiology, bacteriology, virology, parasitology, internal medicine, patho-physiology, comparative physiology, zoonotic diseases of human concern, pharmacy & related chemistry, biochemistry, animal welfare, and foreign and reportable diseases; all of which pertain to ensuring food safety. Compare these educational experiences/credentials to that required of a food inspector.

The educational requirement for a newly hired FI is one year of specialized experience or a bachelor's degree that includes twelve semester hours in biological, physical, mathematical, or agricultural sciences (e.g., animal science, meat science, food technology, agriculture, microbiology, biology, or chemistry). A bachelor's degree in food safety includes courses in:

biology, chemistry, physics, organic chemistry, biochemistry, physiology, food composition & analysis, introduction to food science, anatomy and biostatistics.

All other staff and management personnel within FSIS are there to support the work that these SPHVs and FI's perform in the slaughter and processing establishments and to protect the importation/exportation of meat and meat products.

It is critical to the FSIS mission and goals that the SPHVs and FIs workforces are well-staffed, well-trained, and supported. However, FSIS has had a chronically high vacancy level (11%) among SPHVs for many years and the FI vacancy level is often high in some FSIS districts (7-11%). Veterinarians provide supervision and oversight of slaughter operations and inspections worldwide because of their knowledge of animal diseases, and sanitation. However, it is reported often that very small livestock slaughter establishments have no veterinarian in their supervisory chain of command and some have no veterinarian within a 3 hour drive because of the high SPHV vacancy level. NAFV feels this staffing issue needs to be corrected quickly.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) studied and reported on the federal veterinary workforce in 2009 and 2015. The GAO made several recommendations concerning shortages and gaps in the federal veterinary workforce. In response, FSIS took action in 2010 by offering hiring incentives to all newly hired SPHVs including a 25% salary bonus for up to four years and student loan repayment for two years at \$10,000 per year. With these incentives, FSIS was able to decrease their SPHV vacancy rate from 15% to 5% by 2011.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is currently assessing its veterinary workforce to identify gaps and solutions. There is a 2016 American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Report on the Market for Veterinarians which states that the number of employment opportunities exceeded the number of applicants for veterinary jobs in late 2015 for the first time since 2009 and that trend continues today. This trend will create more competition for veterinarians between private and public practice and make it more difficult for the public sector to hire SPHV's without equivalent pay and compensation with the private veterinary sector.

Since 2012, limited funding has prevented FSIS from continuing to offer those incentives to SPHV's and the vacancy level rapidly increased to over 11%, where it currently remains. In May, 2016, FSIS, initiated several limited-incentives including:

1. Forty recruitment/relocation, multiple-year (4 year) SPHV monetary incentives, limited to "difficult-to-staff" locations, (defined as positions vacant for more than 6 months) for Fiscal Years (FY) 2016, FY 2017, and FY 2018. In year one the incentive amounts to 10% of the base salary; in year two the incentive increases to 15%; in year three the incentive increases to 20% and in year four the incentive increases to 25% of the base salary. The SPHV is required to sign a service agreement for those 4 years. Thereafter the incentive is removed.
2. Up to fifty, one-year incentives of \$7000 are being offered to SPHV's, Food Inspectors and Consumer Safety Inspectors in targeted difficult-to-staff locations in FY 2016 and FY 2017 with a one year service agreement.

3. Relocation incentives- (bonuses up to 25% of base pay) are used to entice current employees who are not in a difficult-to-staff location to accept a position in a difficult-to-staff location that requires relocation to a different geographic area (i.e., more than 50 miles from their current duty location). Employee must establish residence in the new geographic area.
4. Ten one-year incentives of up to 25% of basic pay offered on a case-by-case basis for SPHVs, Food Inspectors, and Consumer Safety Inspectors in targeted difficult-to-staff locations.
5. Student loan repayment includes- thirty multiple-year payments offered to SPHVs, FIs- (Food Inspectors, and Consumer Safety Inspectors) with eligible student loans in FY 2016, FY 2017 and FY 2018. The student loan repayment consists of up to \$10,000 for three years and a 3 year service agreement is required.

Unfortunately, since these incentives are temporary and very limited in number (only one is focused only on SPHV, all other are competitive between other positions), FSIS has not significantly reduced the SPHV vacancy level in 2016. To address this serious hiring issue, FSIS established a SPHV staffing work group in late 2016 to develop better methods and incentives for recruiting and retaining SPHVs.

National Association of Federal Veterinarians Plan **The Growing Concern**

The National Association of Federal Veterinarians (NAFV) has been concerned with this chronic FSIS SPHV vacancy level since it increased above 5%, for the following reasons:

1. Veterinary supervision is critical to ensuring the FSIS food safety mission and goals are met.
2. The SPHV vacancies create double or triple workloads for the remaining SPHV's who must also cover these vacant positions.
3. These vacancies are often long-term and the extra workload causes the covering SPHV to 'burn- out' over time.
4. The increased workloads prevent the SPHV from timely supervision of plant operations and/or the SPHV must work long hours after their assigned shift to complete their assigned duties and reports.
5. The long working hours prevent SPHV's from having a desirable work/life balance and therefore many leave federal service or transfer to other federal agencies causing further SPHV vacancies.
6. Recruitment incentives are temporary and short-term and a high percentage of employees leave FSIS when the incentives end- for more reasonable positions.
7. The retention incentives in the "difficult-to-staff" positions are not adequate to keep individuals in most of those positions long-term.
8. Excessive workloads prevent SPHV's from having time to attend training and continuing education courses. They often complain of needing additional agency policy training to

function well in their positions and they must depend on peers for advice when supervisors are not available.

9. Some SPHV's have supervisors who do not have the training or education to correctly answer veterinary-related questions regarding carcass dispositions, ante-mortem inspection or post mortem inspection, veterinary certification for trade, etc.

Recruitment of SPHV's by FSIS has not been as effective as needed. FSIS has not made the SPHV position attractive enough to keep more highly-qualified veterinarians employed. There is no mechanism for most SPHVs to use their knowledge outside the slaughter establishments to assist FSIS in policy development and there is an inadequate veterinary career-ladder for most SPHVs who wish to advance within the organization. As a result, this has created an unattractive work environment; a resultant lack of long-term employee fulfillment/satisfaction and/or commitment to the career track and a lack of advancement potential. These issues prevent FSIS from always attracting the best and brightest SPHV's (with leadership desire and potential) to remain with FSIS which damages the future SPHV perception and position.

A Case for Veterinary Supervision

Veterinary supervision of the FSIS public health-based food safety program at the slaughter establishment level is essential for the following reasons:

1. Slaughter and dressing process control assessment, good commercial practices or humane handling, whole carcass dispositions, and other SPHV food safety responsibilities require on-site SPHV presence.
2. Foreign animal disease surveillance- the slaughter process inspection is one of the first lines of defense in rapidly identifying disease-affected animals with especially dangerous pathogens. Veterinarians (SPHV) are the most knowledgeable professionals in identifying infected animals.
3. Most countries require an official USDA veterinarian (SPHV) to certify trade and health certificates that attend any imported meat and animal product. Without it countries will refuse to accept the imported US meat and animal products. Moreover, SPHV's cannot provide this certification unless they are in charge of the inspection operations within the establishment and have direct knowledge and observation of the animals being slaughtered.
4. During the inspection process, only the SPHV has the education and knowledge to identify and classify pathology (acute vs chronic, active vs passive, local vs general, etc.) and make a determination if the carcass is safe.
5. Laboratory tissue sampling and submission procedures can only be properly performed under the oversight of the SPHV who has the education and knowledge of anatomy and pathology to detect zoonotic and foreign animal diseases (e.g. tuberculosis, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, parasitism, etc.).
6. The SPHV has the education and knowledge to explain to establishment management the public health reasons for specific regulations and carcass dispositions.

SPHV Staffing Recommendations:

1. The SPHV must remain responsible for and supervise all food animal slaughter operations as the Inspector in Charge.
2. In larger establishments, a SPHV could have Supervisory Consumer Safety Inspectors (SCSI; GS 9 or 10) as in-establishment subordinate supervisors to assist in administrative responsibilities including providing employee breaks and performance rating recommendations to the SPHV.
3. To address a future role for the Front Line Supervisor (FLS)- require new FLS positions have basic (to be defined) food safety education and knowledge validated by a formal credentialing system created by an outside creditable organization. A four year animal or food science degree and/or a structured on-the-job course over four years would qualify. This would create a more highly qualified workforce of food safety professionals to supervise SPHV operations at slaughter establishments.
4. The SPHV on-boarding (hiring) process is too complicated and cumbersome and must be streamlined. SPHV interested in working for FSIS often wait for months after they apply before being contacted. The Office of Personnel and Management provide FSIS with Direct Hiring Authority which helps in streamlining the process. FSIS must create a better more efficient on-boarding process.
5. Expand the “other than full time” category for part time SPHV positions to allow private veterinary practitioners to work for FSIS on a fixed schedule each week or bi-weekly period in remote and “difficult to staff” locations. Provide benefits proportional to the number of hours worked per pay period.
6. Create flexible schedules for SPHV’s to share positions when it meets the needs of FSIS.
7. Establish the maximum number of establishments, direct reports, and geographic dispersion that a SPHV covers as a GS-12- to avoid overextending/overworking SPHVs. Additional points to be included:
 - a. When the geography and establishment size permit- a SPHV may cover more than one establishment.
 - b. The SPHV/IIC must supervise and manage all inspection activities within each slaughter establishment.
 - c. There can be a subordinate SCSI in an establishment, but the SCSI must report to the in-plant SPHV- not the FLS.
8. The SPHV-IIC does not need to routinely give employee breaks in an establishment with a SCSI.
9. In large poultry slaughter plants (young chicken or turkey with minimal pathology) -at least one SPHV would be required to be assigned to each establishment. The SPHV is the IIC and can work one shift. SCSI’s cover the other shifts and report directly to the SPHV- IIC on the first shift.
10. In large poultry slaughter establishments, geographically separated from others more than 30 min, the SPHV should not cover more than one establishment on a routine or ongoing basis.
11. In very small livestock or traditional poultry (young animals with minimal pathology) slaughter facilities- at least one SPHV would be assigned for every 3-6 very small

slaughter/processing establishments. In-establishment CSI-9s would report directly to the SPHV with a maximum of 5 direct reports.

12. Maintain the Chief Public Health Veterinarian position within FSIS as an SES/SL position reporting to the Administrator.
13. Situations where a SPHV cannot be moved from direct oversight of the establishment and/or inspectors on each shift would be:
 - a. High-pathology establishments (livestock or poultry)-where there are more than 1% general signs and conditions in body movement, and action, body position, condition, function, surfaces, discharges, and body odor.
 - b. Any livestock slaughter establishment that slaughters daily, 5 days/week, at least 8 hours a day.
 - c. Very large poultry slaughter establishments that have greater than 4 lines (these establishments would likely have subordinate SCSIs on each shift also). This may be different for very large NPIS establishments as there would not be GS-7s to supervise.
14. In all cases, where an SPHV supervises an area or more than one shift:
 - a. Agency allows them to work a flexible shift (based on the hours that his/her establishments operate).
 - b. USDA should also allow non-reimbursable overtime for situations that require the SPHV to work outside of their 8-hour day, but within the establishment's official hours.
 - c. SPHV is responsible for poultry disposition correlation on all shifts they supervise.
 - d. SPHV makes all disposition decisions for red meat, as specified in the regulation.
 - e. SPHV is responsible for signing export certificates under their supervision.
 - f. SPHV has ultimate oversight of all slaughter establishment food safety systems.
 - i. SPHV is responsible for signing off on export certificates under their supervision.
 - ii. SPHV is not required or expected to provide online breaks for line inspectors on a routine basis

SPHV Recruitment Recommendations:

Priority One:

1. **Provide specialty pay** to all veterinarians in federal service, regardless of their employment series (comparable to the Title 38 medical personnel pay, currently received by federal physicians, dentists, nurses, etc.).
2. **Offer recruitment incentives to SPHVs** as recommended below:
 - a. Twenty five percent pay bonus for the first 2 years for all locations.
 - b. Student loan repayment of \$5000 for ten years with a service agreement.
 - c. Hire all veterinarians at a GS-12 level. Those with more experience can be hired at higher step levels.
 - d. Offer relocation reimbursement to all new hires and all employees relocated by the agency.
 - e. Provide additional initial orientation training.
 - f. Provide annual 2-3 day District SPHV training (including training given to SCSIs) where all SPHVs in each District are required to attend within the same fiscal

year. Training would be offered multiple times in each District to allow all SPHV to attend.

- g. Provide new hires with the appropriate leave category that is consistent with the number of qualified years they worked in other veterinary service activities.
- h. Provide availability for upgrades in leave category to current SPHVs with an outstanding rating.

Priority Two:

- a. Partner with veterinary colleges to include providing information about public practice opportunities, especially within FSIS, in the annual curriculum for each veterinary student
- b. **Use social media tools** to provide information about SPHV and FI duties through webinars, podcasts, Facebook, etc. to veterinary students and the public.

SPHV Retention Recommendations:

Priority One:

- 1. In difficult-to-staff locations provide a 15% annual bonus to remain in that location. A signed one-year service agreement would be required each new year.
- 2. Provide and/or pay for 40 hours of professional management and/or food -safety training per year (includes administrative leave). This would include professional meetings/subjects that would apply to work performed in FSIS. FSIS would provide or reimburse the employee and provide administrative leave for outside training of at least 8 hours training every other year on supervisory training.

Priority Two:

- 1. Increase the incentive for gaining additional knowledge level and expertise of professionals in federal agencies by providing Board Certified Specialty Pay (BCSP). This pay is for individuals who become experts in recognized specialty fields. This type of pay is already available to Military veterinarians under authority of the Department of Defense (7000.14-R, Vol.7A, Chapter 7) The DOD BCSP is up to \$6,000 per year.
- 2. Hire at least one SPHV to be on the FSIS recruitment staff to lead, coordinate and improve SPHV recruitment efforts.
- 3. Require only SPHVs who are knowledgeable about all aspects of FSIS to attend all SPHV recruitment events.
- 4. If an employee is offered a job outside the agency, provide a 15% four-year bonus to remain in that location. A signed two year service agreement would be required.
- 5. FSIS would authorize four days of administrative leave annually to attend local veterinary continuing educational meetings and/or state or federal related Veterinary Medical Association meetings to interact and educate veterinarians on FSIS policies and procedures.
- 6. Create a new SPHV Advisory Staff for SPHV's to contact for advice and guidance. The specialist SPHV's would coach and advise the field SPHV's on issues that arise and guide them when needed.

References

ⁱ Scallan E, Hoekstra RM, Angulo FJ, Tauxe RV, Widdowson M-A, Roy SL, et al. Foodborne illness acquired in the United States—Major Pathogens. *Emerg Infect Dis.* 2011 17(1):7-15 <https://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid1701.P11101> - [cited October 29, 2015].

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/safe/foodborne.html>