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AllergyEats Founder: Food Allergy Laws for Restaurants Should be More Comprehensive
Advocates For Improved Food Allergy Legislation & Training for Restaurants

BOSTON, MA (May 1, 2013) –   For years, food allergy advocates have been striving for legislation requiring food allergy awareness in restaurants, but until a few years ago, such education had not been a requirement anywhere in the U.S. In 2010, that changed when Massachusetts passed the Food Allergy Awareness Act, specifying actions that each restaurant in the state must implement to increase their food allergy knowledge. Paul Antico, Founder/CEO of AllergyEats, the leading guide to allergy-friendly restaurants nationwide, applauds Massachusetts for creating groundbreaking legislation, but he urges other states to implement more comprehensive, effective laws.

Under the Massachusetts law, every restaurant statewide is required to have a designated person watch a 30-minute food allergy training video, display an allergy awareness poster in their kitchen, and include a line on their menus or on their menu boards asking guests to inform their server about any food allergies in their party.

"I was excited when Massachusetts passed this legislation - not because of the specifics of the law itself, but from the expectation that its passage would begin a cascade of other states enacting new food allergy awareness laws. And that's exactly what's happening," explained Antico, the father of three food-allergic children and a passionate food allergy advocate. "The Massachusetts law got the ball rolling, but it isn't nearly effective or comprehensive enough. I encourage other states to take this initiative even further by passing improved legislation - which wouldn't be expensive or burdensome for restaurants."

Rhode Island recently passed its own food allergy awareness bill, which goes into effect in July 2013. The new Rhode Island law, modeled after the Massachusetts legislation with similar provisions, also requires restaurants statewide to have a "food protection manager" who is trained and certified in food-allergy awareness.

Similar bills are now being considered in other states, including Maryland. Maryland's law would require restaurants to designate a "person in charge," who would watch a food allergy training video to learn how to safely serve people with food allergies. When food-allergic guests visit a restaurant, they could speak to the person in charge about their special dietary restrictions, and this trained contact would be educated about menu items, ingredient lists, food preparation techniques and avoiding cross-contamination.

"The current and proposed legislation are a step in the right direction, but need further refinement. Other states' new laws should require some simple, easy-to-implement additional steps that won't be burdensome for restaurants. For instance, new laws should require more than just one employee per restaurant be trained in food allergy procedures, and should mandate that one food allergy-trained manager must be on site at all times. This small change could make a big difference in providing a safer dining experience for food-allergic guests," Antico continued. "Additionally, restaurants' food allergy training should be more extensive than watching a 30 minute video. There are ways to dramatically improve restaurants' food allergy awareness and protocols that are not overly expensive or burdensome, with training, conferences, and webinars widely available on this topic."

"Also, the verbiage on Massachusetts restaurant menus, asking people with food allergies to notify their server, is giving too many food-allergic diners a false sense of security. Some guests –

including many from out-of-state and unfamiliar with the law – are erroneously assuming this statement means a restaurant is well-trained in food allergy protocols, which is often not the case. This misunderstanding could potentially result in a very dangerous situation," Antico said. "Perhaps this disclaimer could be modified, asking food-allergic individuals to engage in dialogue with the restaurant's staff to discuss their specific dietary restrictions, as well as the restaurant's food allergy protocols and safeguards. Another option might be 'State law requires us to remind you to please inform your server if someone in your party has a food allergy.'"

According to Antico, the best provision in the Massachusetts law is the development of a set of criteria that restaurants can meet to be officially designated allergy-friendly. This is *not* a requirement for restaurants, but it does offer a way for those that put in the extra effort around food allergy training to differentiate themselves. Unfortunately, the provision is not currently being followed in Massachusetts. The criteria and process were never finalized, and this allergy-friendly designation seems to have been indefinitely tabled. Antico hopes other states enact and implement similar provisions in their new laws, so people can more easily identify allergy-friendly restaurants.

"We're certainly moving in the right direction but we must push for improvements. Let's look at the Massachusetts legislation as a starting point, and advocate for more effective food allergy laws that make restaurants even safer for the millions of food-allergic individuals in this country," Antico continued.

Meanwhile, other states - including Hawaii, New Hampshire, and Minnesota - have also been proactive about food allergy issues, and advocates are hopeful about legislative progress in those states. Ideally, every state will soon pass legislation around this issue.

According to the National Restaurant Association (NRA), 130 million people eat at a food establishment daily. As many as 15 million people, 9 million of them adults, have food allergies nationwide, according to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, and these numbers are expected to rise. With a reported 4% of the U.S. population living with food allergies, and millions of food-allergic people dining out each day, it's critically important to implement laws to protect the safety of all guests - including those with food allergies.

AllergyEats, a free, peer-based website and smartphone app, is dramatically improving the way food-allergic and gluten intolerant individuals find - and rate - allergy-friendly restaurants. The easy-to-use ratings and comment system allows food-allergic diners to instantly share their feedback about their restaurant experiences. This peer-based ratings and review site lets people see at-a-glance which restaurants have been more willing and better able to accommodate special dietary requirements, allowing food-allergic diners to make more informed choices about where to dine.

AllergyEats lists more than 600,000 restaurants nationwide, which food allergic diners can rate. The site also offers information on over 425,000 menus (including gluten-free menus), allergen lists, nutrition information, certifications, web links, directions and more.   The site, app and related social media sites help families with food allergies reduce the guesswork - and the anxiety - surrounding dining out with food allergies.

Most restaurant review sites include information about establishments' food, ambiance or service, but AllergyEats is singularly focused on food allergies, with peer reviews spotlighting where people with food allergies or intolerances have more comfortably eaten.

AllergyEats has been endorsed by highly-respected food, health and allergy organizations and individuals, including the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Gluten Intolerance Group, Massachusetts Restaurant Association, Chef Ming Tsai, Chef Joel Schaefer and more.   AllergyEats

was recently selected as the About.com 2012 Readers' Choice Award winner for best Food Allergy App. The AllergyEats smartphone app also won a Web Health Award and was honored as one of Healthline's Top Ten Food Allergy Apps. For more information, please visit www.AllergyEats.com.

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