# Guidance for Food Distribution Sites During a Disaster

## Background
During any type of unexpected disaster, there is a need to provide food to help the community. Food distribution sites often rely on volunteers for help preparing and handing out food. It is important that food is handled properly and served safe to the public. With a potential limitation of resources, such as refrigerated food storage or hot holding units, alternative public health controls can be used to prevent foodborne illness. Shelf-stable foods are preferred, but if they are not available in sufficient quantity, these guidelines should be followed.

## Purpose
Potentially Hazardous Food (PHF) is food that needs to be kept refrigerated (41°F or less) or hot (135°F or more) to prevent the growth of harmful bacteria. During a disaster, refrigeration and hot holding units may not be readily available at the distribution sites to maintain PHF at safe temperatures. In such cases alternative methods to control the safety of the food are necessary. Guidance is provided to ensure food is safe to consume when it is held at room temperature before, during and after food is distributed.

## Preparation of PHF for Distribution
- The maximum time to prepare, package and distribute PHF **without** temperature control must not exceed a cumulative total time of 4 hours. Food that is held in continuous temperature control can be served for any period of time.
- PHF that is prepared and cooked in advance and intended for next day service shall be rapidly cooled to 41°F and below within 4 hours. This food can be packaged anytime the food has completely cooled to 41°F.
- PHF intended to be prepared hot and served immediately at the distribution sites shall follow strict time coding requirements to ensure the food does not exceed the 4-hour maximum time out of temperature control to ensure the food is safe to consume.
- Portion commercially manufactured food or food that is prepared in advance at an approved kitchen. Food should be packaged into food containers as quickly as possible and never take longer than 2 hours. To prevent the growth of harmful bacteria, do not vacuum package PHF unless approval was granted by the California Department of Public Health.
- PHF should be stored under temperature control until it is ready to be transported to the distribution site(s). If PHF cannot be immediately refrigerated or hot held, it should be transported/distributed immediately after packaging.
- PHF should be transported in refrigerated trucks (below 41°F) or in powered hot-holding units to keep food hot (135°F minimum). If temperature controls are not available, travel time should be minimized to not exceed 30 minutes.
- Each packaging should have the date indicating when the food was cooked, prepared or packaged.

## Maintaining a Short Food Service Distribution Time
It is critical to track the time PHF is out of temperature control to ensure PHF is not stored at room temperature for a cumulative time of 4 hours or more. Staff/volunteers should track delivery and service times to ensure food distribution does not exceed 2 hours.

## Distribution of PHF to the Consumer
If PHF has been out of temperature control for a total of 4 hours from preparation, packaging or removal from refrigeration to distribution, it is no longer safe and should be discarded.
- The distribution period of PHF should not exceed 2 hours if adequate temperature control and temperature monitoring is not available onsite.
- If PHF is not consumed immediately, the food can be stored in the refrigerator or placed in the freezer as soon as possible.
- Reheat hot foods to an internal temperature of 165°F for 15 seconds.