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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Possible source of Coachella Valley food-borne illness found in sample tested by state health officials

Tests conducted on food collected after dozens of employees of a shuttle bus company became ill last month detected a bacterial toxin that can cause the symptoms described by those who became sick.

A state health department laboratory reported this week that Staphylococcal aureus (Staph) enterotoxin was detected in the food sample collected by a Los Angeles County resident who became ill shortly after eating a dinner catered for employees of a shuttle bus company on April 24. The company had provided shuttle service for the Coachella Music Festival.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), staphylococcal food poisoning results from eating food contaminated with toxins produced by this bacteria. The toxin can cause of a variety of symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhea. Those who became ill said their symptoms started about three hours after eating the meal.

Because sampled food items were mixed, health officials have not determined the specific food item that caused the sickness.

“Through collaboration with Environmental Health and the vendor, we have been able to interview hundreds of people who attended the dinner with the idea of determining the circumstances around the meal,” said Kim Saruwatari, director of the Riverside County Public Health Department. “The goal was to identify the specific food or item that caused so many to become ill.”

More than 40 people were taken to three hospitals in the Coachella Valley early April 25 after they complained of various symptoms. A handful of patients were admitted to hospitals at that time but have since been released. Typically, with staph-related food illnesses, according to CDC, symptoms last no longer than one day and severe illness is rare.

Investigators with the Riverside County departments of public health and environmental health collaborated throughout the incident. Investigators conducted nearly 300 interviews – those who

became ill and those who did not – and identified one person who had become ill and taken some of the food home.

The investigation was limited by the fact that many of those who got sick live outside Riverside County and may have sought medical care from a hospital or medical provider in another jurisdiction. Riverside County officials alerted local health jurisdictions throughout Southern California and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) about the incident so potential patients could be interviewed. CDPH, in turn, notified state health departments about individuals who lived outside of California.

Officials emphasized that it did not appear any attendees of the music festival were affected.

According to the CDC, the best way to avoid food poisoning by Staph is to prevent perishable food from being held at room temperature for more than two hours.

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