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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: Thursday, May 24, 2012

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**LAB RESULTS INDICATE CAUSE OF FOOD POISONING
AT THE MOTHER'S DAY MONASTERY EVENT**

Staphylococcus aureus identified as culprit in recent food poisoning outbreak

Brewster, NY -Testing conducted at Wadsworth Center, the public health laboratory of the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), has determined that the food-borne illness from the May 13th Mother's Day gathering held at the Chuang Yen Monastery in Kent, New York was staphylococcal food poisoning. *Staphylococcus aureus* (*S. aureus*) bacterium was detected both in patient specimens and in several food samples from the event.

While *S. aureus* is a common bacterium found on the skin and in the noses of up to 25% of healthy people and animals, it can produce toxins, especially in food if it is kept at improper temperatures. If ingested, these toxins can cause staphylococcal food poisoning, a gastrointestinal illness. Staphylococcus toxins are fast acting, and can cause illness in as little as 30 minutes.

Symptoms of staphylococcal food poisoning usually develop within one to six hours after eating contaminated food. Patients typically experience several of the following symptoms: nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, and diarrhea. The illness is usually mild and most patients recover after one to three days. Patients with this illness are not contagious, as the toxins are not transmitted from one person to another. In this incident, approximately 100 attendees became ill and five were hospitalized; all have been discharged.

The event had seventeen volunteer food vendors, many of whom prepared and served similar food items. Linking the food samples that tested positive to any particular vendor may not be possible, since the food samples were collected by the Putnam County Department of Health after the event was over and in some cases came from discarded plates. As part of the epidemiological investigation, attendees of this event were interviewed to determine the specific food items that each person ate that day. This information is currently being reviewed to determine if a food item can be statistically linked to the illness. Most of the food served at the event was prepared off-site by the volunteers in their homes and then transported to the monastery. Some of the food was held at improper temperatures before, during and after transport.

To prevent the contamination of food with *Staphylococcus* and halt toxin production, the following guidelines should be followed:

- Wash hands and under fingernails vigorously with soap and water before handling and as necessary during the preparation of food.
- Do not prepare food or serve food to others if you have wounds or skin infections on your hands or wrists, or have a nose or eye infection.
- Keep kitchens and food-serving areas clean and sanitized.
- If food is to be held longer than two hours before eating, keep hot foods hot (over 140°F) and cold foods cold (40°F or under).
- Store cooked food in a wide, shallow container to allow for faster cooling and refrigerate as soon as possible (ideally when food cools to 120°F).

For additional information on preventing food-borne illness, please contact your local health department. Putnam residents may call the Putnam County Health Department's Environmental Health staff at (845) 808-1390. You can also visit the CDC's website for more information on staphylococcal food poisoning at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dlbmd/diseases/staphylococcal/> or go to www.cdc.gov and search for "staphylococcal food poisoning."

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