RUSHING TO VICTORY
UL takes down NSU 44-17 in first home game of the season.

THE SUN ADVERTISER

RESTAURANT INSPECTIONS:
GOOD ENOUGH?

Problems: Only 2 eating places in the state were closed down since 2010 for health reasons; possible 'not-a-surprise' evaluations and few checks and balances

MEGAN WYATT
MWYATT@THEADVERTISER.COM

On May 14, the Louisiana Office of Alcohol and Tobacco Control discovered a used condom, moldy furniture and a broken cooler filled with food and clothing — conditions the agency described as unacceptable — inside Lipstick, a Johnston Street strip club.

Just 10 days earlier, an inspector with the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals gave the club a relatively clean bill of health.

It wasn't an isolated incident. A Daily Advertiser investigation into recent inspections by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals found that:

- Inspectors can overlook major violations.
- One restaurant owner claims he is tipped off when it comes to "surprise" inspections.
- Consumers seeking information about the cleanliness of bars and restaurants find that inspection results are not easy-to-digest.

As a result of the Daily Advertiser's findings, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hos-

See INSPECT, Page 11A

88,892
Inspections in 2014 in Louisiana.

4,392
Inspections in 2014 in Lafayette Parish.

209
Number of sanitarians (inspectors) in Louisiana.

7
The number in Lafayette Parish.

2
Places in the state closed by the Department of Health and Hospitals in 2010.

0
Number closed in Lafayette Parish since 2010.

See for yourself
You can view the score of your favorite Louisiana restaurant or bar in our color-coded, interactive online map. You can also quickly learn which spots receive unacceptable scores or find out how your child's school cafeteria is rated. Check it out at theadvertiser.com.

These conditions at the Lipstick nightclub were documented by ATC investigators May 14. Ten days earlier, a DHH inspector found no critical health violations at the club.
Inspect

Continued from Page 1A

pitals announced it would begin an investigation.

Few establishments closed

During the last five years, Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals has closed only two establishments for unsanitary conditions: Buckshot's in Gueydan in 2010 and Cypress Inn in Monroe in 2014.

Sibley was not among them; it was instead closed May 14 by the Louisiana Office of Alcohol and Tobacco Control (ATC) for criminal activity that included prostitution, obscenity and drug possession.

Still, the May 4 inspection of Lipstick by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH) found only seven noncritical violations — infractions that needed to be corrected but posed no threat to public health or safety.

Mops weren't being dried properly. Lighting wasn't bright enough. Litter and unnecessary items were found. A cooler lacked a thermometer. Ice used to cool food was also served to customers. Openings did not protect against rodent or insect entry.

"Apparently a lot happened in 10 days when ATC went in and took those pictures," says Tiffany Sonnier, who oversees inspectors in the Acadiana area for the Department of Health and Hospitals.

Tenney Sibley, director of sanitarian services for DHH, agreed.

"All of those things could have happened in the 10 days we inspected. "Mold cannot happen overnight," Sibley says. "But were those chairs there when my inspector went in? I don't know that. Maybe they brought those chairs in for a big party Saturday night."

As for a broken cooler containing food and clothing, Sibley said, "Any restaurant owner can tell you that a cooler can go out at any time."

Troy Hebert, the ATC commissioner, doesn't buy it.

"I saw the pictures, and the pictures don't lie," Hebert says. "It was basically pitiful to see conditions like that in a business."

Kathy Kliebert, secretary of the Louisiana DHH, said Friday she will take action.

Kliebert had not seen the ATC photos until Thursday. The Advertiser made public record requests and conducted interviews about Lipstick with her staff beginning in July.

"After viewing the photos myself, I definitely understand the concern," Kliebert said.

"The mold wouldn't have happened over 10 days," Kliebert said. "We know there are some things that we are going back over with our sanitarian team to make sure that we're doing the very best we can to make sure that this inspector or any other inspector is doing what they're supposed to."

Kliebert said she has no reason to believe the inspector behaved improperly, but DHH is now investigating the situation.

Kliebert also said she has scheduled a meeting with ATC staff about forming a inspection partnership.

Although not the primary function of the ATC, the state agency can fine and shut down a bar, restaurant or store that is unclean.

In January, ATC investigators discovered unsanitary conditions at Oak Ridge Lounge in Pine Grove, including a rat in a food preparation area, so-

fes with trash-filled holes and a used condom.

Three months earlier, on Oct. 28, 2014, DHH inspectors found only a missing thermometer in the beer cooler, lack of hand-washing supplies and unclean floors — all non-critical violations.

The lounge was inspected again by DHH before being closed by the ATC in January.

"I would hope that the DHH would revisit the way inspections are conducted given how awful the conditions were," Hebert said. "Hopefully, they will see that something was going on here that they weren't aware of. I think the DHH needs to take a hard look at that."

Few checks, balances

While there is a quality control system in place at the DHH, no outside agencies check the work of the inspectors.

"We do sometimes go behind inspectors — an audit program, if you will — but that never happens 10 days later," Sibley says. "It happens immediately after an inspection because an inspection is only a snapshot. There are numerous things that can go bad really quick."

Some inspectors are stricter than others, according to restaurant owners.

One restaurant owner, speaking anonymously, said his inspector is friendly and sometimes lets him know ahead of time when "surprise" visits will happen.

Sibley, Sonnier and Kliebert all said that is against protocol.

"It's totally unacceptable," Kliebert said. "It's completely against our policy."

Tamika Carron, who has been a field inspector for 14 years in Acadiana, can't imagine tipping off a restaurant owner of an upcoming inspection.

"I would find that hard to believe that an inspector would do that," Carron says. "I'm shocked to hear of something like that because I take my job seriously."

DHH denied multiple requests to observe the restaurant inspection process.

Kliebert says that the state health inspection process is continuously improving.

In 2012, she said, a legislative audit prompted the DHH to implement a new scheduling system that allows for more efficiency.

The system assigns inspections schedules to restaurants at four times per year, depending on the day offered and population served, Kliebert said.

A snowball stand, for instance, would be inspected annually. A nursing home or hospital would be inspected four times per year.

Any establishment that has one or more uncorrected critical violations — or five or more uncorrected noncritical violations — during a routine inspection is reinspected within a few days.

If the business still isn't in compliance at the time of the reinspection, DHH can begin a process to fine or close the restaurant.

"We knew changes were needed because we were completely backlogged on inspections," Kliebert said. "Today, we're completely caught up. We're tracking high-

risk vendors in real time."

DHH boasts transparency since inspection reports are available online.

But records might not be useful to the average consumer — a person must search for a restaurant or business and pull reports individually instead of sorting through businesses by ratings.

Each report lists individual infractions without a summary or score, and the infractions are not always easy to understand.

The only way a critical violation — or one that could lead to serious illness — is distinguished from a noncritical one is by a small asterisk beside the violation number.

Reports themselves do not identify what the asterisk signifies. Instead, a separate explainer on the website does.

No summary or grade is given to restaurants based on the results of the inspection, meaning there is no quick way to identify places with clean records or multiple, critical violations.

"As an agency, we've made the decision that we..."
Continued from Previous Page

has been in place for at least 25 years.
Restaurants are issued scores on a scale of 0 to 100, and those scores also serve as guidelines for future inspections.
Inspectors visit restaurants for the public. Among these are New York City, Los Angeles and Alabama.

In Alabama, a numerical grading system for restaurants begins with a score of 100 and lose four or five points for each noncritical violation. A score of 85 or better is considered passing.

“抗疫 or letter scores at this time,” Sibley says. “At this time, that’s our philosophy and the approach that we choose to take.”

Making the grade
Only about 60 jurisdictions in 28 states use some form of grading to rate restaurant sanitation, according to the National Restaurant Association. Some of those require grades to be posted in restaurants for the public. Among these are New York City, Los Angeles and Alabama.

A restaurant that scores below 60 is shut down immediately for posing an imminent health risk.
Restaurants begin with a score of 100 and lose four or five points for each noncritical violation. A score of 85 or better is considered passing.

“Our citizens expect to see these scores and know what they mean,” says Mark Sestak, who has worked for the Alabama Department of Public Health for 27 years. “The restaurant side is comfortable with it, too. It’s a motive or incentive for them because they know customers are looking for these scores.”

Restaurant associations nationwide are generally opposed to such grading systems. Poor scores could scare away customers.

Stan Harris, president of the Louisiana Restaurant Association, says the organization opposes a grading system. “Adding scores or grades provides no additional assurance to a guest on the food safety practices of an establishment,” said Harris.

There's an app for that
A third-party smartphone app called “What the Health?” allows Louisiana users to view letter and numerical grades for nearby restaurants and facilities.

The app assigns grades to establishments based on the number of critical and noncritical violations the state issued during recent inspections. New information is pulled every few days.

Jake Van Dyke, a founder of Modern App Solutions, says he developed this and comparable apps for nine other states and Washington, D.C., because he couldn’t easily assess restaurant cleanliness in his home state of Georgia.

“It's the same situation in Georgia as in Louisiana,” Van Dyke says. “If you try hard enough, you can find each restaurant inspection, but you'd starve to death before you had a chance to read them all.”

Van Dyke's apps have been downloaded more than 100,000 times.

The apps use grades issued by states or counties when available.
For places like Louisiana where no scoring system is in place, the app uses a basic formula similar to those used by some inspection agencies.

Each inspected spot begins with a score of 100 and gets 5,166.6 points deducted for every critical violation and 1 point deducted for every noncritical violation. Repeat offenses get an extra point deducted.

An A is 100-90 points, a B is 89-80 points, a C is 79-70 points and a U is 69 or fewer points.

“The public likes having access to the information,” Van Dyke says. “Now that people can have this information in the palm of their hands, it changes things up.”

But some worry the app could negatively impact restaurants.

“It should be required to clearly express to the public that their score or rating is purely anecdotal,” said Harris of Louisiana Restaurant Association.

“Once type of app could flush the consumer as well as be detrimental to an establishment.”

Sonnier believes the DHH website is all consumers need.

“It’s up to you who you trust,” she said. “We as a state agency have made the information available to you. We certainly don’t endorse the app.

“Not at all, at all, at all.”

Some support for scores
While most area restaurant owners know DHH inspections are posted online, not one of three restaurant owners interviewed had viewed their businesses’ grades on the app.

Deano's Pizza owner Tim Metcalf was pleased to learn the Kaliste Saloon location of the restaurant earned a 90 A, but he was surprised that the Bertrand location earned a 70 C, just one point above the unacceptable U rating.

“I can’t argue with it,” Metcalf said. “It is what it is. A 70 isn’t good, but we’ll do better. We know that we can do better.”

Beryl “Berry” Kemp Moody, owner of Atmosphere Bistro, strongly supports the state issuing grades to businesses.

She’s seen grades posted in other states and feels it’s useful information for the public.

“I would definitely support the scores being posted in the restaurants,” Moody said. “I think having more eyes on something is always better.”

Moody’s restaurant gets an 83 B on What the Health? for two critical violations and six noncritical violations.

“An inspection is a snapshot,” Moody says. “The last time an inspector came was right after we got out of court. I walked right out of the hearing and into Atmosphere, and the inspector was there.”

Only five spots in Lafayette Parish score a U rating on the What the Health? app.

T-Coon’s Restaurant scored 69 for four critical violations and 10 noncritical violations.

Inspection results are black and white, according to T-Coon’s owner David Billeaud.

Violations are issued when a restaurant employee isn’t doing something right or when conditions in the restaurant are unsanitary.

But the app's grading system takes the black and white nature of inspection violations out of context, Billeaud says.

“The app is stupid,” he says. “It’s bogus. It’s not the reality.”