

► BUILDING CAPACITY



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Building Capacity By Tracking Your Time and Activity

Editor's Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the practice of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the *Journal* publishes the Building Capacity column to educate, reinforce, and build on successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

Column contributors are guest authors. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of NEHA.

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I started a new job this week, one in which my responsibilities are divided between two functions. The expectation is that I will spend 75% of my time on project A and 25% of my time on project B.

For many years, I have touted the benefit of daily time and activity tracking. I would explain that if you did not know your time per program and task, how could you know if your permit and/or license fees are defensible? I remember one environmental health director who carried his department's time accounting data into the board of supervisor meetings as his best explanation (or defense) for why fees had to be adjusted. In his case, the fees had to be adjusted to offer any chance of meeting the minimum staffing and service expectations, and he let the data tell the story.

Standard 8

The Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (VNRFRPS) from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) express an expectation for program support and resources. This guidance ensures that retail food regulatory programs are equipped with the necessary resources—both human and financial—to deliver those services reliably and effectively. That narrative around Standard 8 speaks to staffing, productivity, administrative overhead, budgeting, and resources.

Whether an agency is pursuing the VNRFRPS or is targeting its own organizational goals, there comes a time when you just must simply “show your work.”

As a simplified example:

1. A food safety program is responsible for monitoring 1,200 retail food facilities.

“Time is what we want most, but what we use worst.”

William Penn

2. The intent is to deliver at least one routine inspection per year, which is 1,200 inspections each year. (Note. The intent might be more than one inspection per year if your agency assigns risk categories and embraces a risk-based inspection frequency as per Standard 3 and Annex 5.)
3. The VNRFRPS suggest that one full-time employee (FTE) inspector might be able to handle 280–320 inspection events per year.
4. That is between three and five FTE inspectors.
5. As a placeholder, let us use \$120,000 as the “fully burdened” cost of a qualified inspector, which is intended to include salary, benefits, office space, equipment, administration, supervision, transportation, and training.
6. Therefore, each facility's permit and/or license fee is going to be in the neighborhood of \$450 per year.

Table 1 provides a visual picture of this example. Please consider this example through your lens and integrate your unique agency circumstances. Also note that variations are published in the Alternative Standard 8 Workbook 2023 (see Sidebar).

As a Personal Discipline

The previous example paints with broad strokes. Every contributor has meetings,

TABLE 1

Calculation Table

Parameter	Value	Explanation
Total facilities	1,200	Given
Routine inspections per facility per year	1	Assumption is one inspection per facility per year
Total inspections per year	1,200	1,200 facilities × 1 routine inspection each year <i>Note.</i> The total number of inspections per year might be higher if a risk-based inspection frequency is used.
Inspector productivity (lower bound)	320 inspections/year	As per the FDA VNRFRPS
Inspector productivity (upper bound)	280 inspections/year	As per the FDA VNRFRPS
FTE inspectors needed (lower bound)	~3.75 FTE	= 1,200 ÷ 320
FTE inspectors needed (upper bound)	~4.29 FTE	= 1,200 ÷ 280
Assumed inspector staffing	4–5 FTE	Based on the range above
Fully burdened cost per inspector	\$120,000	Includes salary, benefits, office, equipment, transportation, and training
Total annual staffing cost (4 FTE)	\$480,000	= \$120,000 × 4 (lower bound)
Total annual staffing cost (5 FTE)	\$600,000	= \$120,000 × 5 (upper bound)
Annual cost per facility (lower bound)	~\$400	= \$480,000 ÷ 1,200
Annual cost per facility (upper bound)	~\$500	= \$600,000 ÷ 1,200
Equitable annual permit fee (midpoint)	~\$450	= Average (\$400, \$500) = (\$400 + \$500) ÷ 2 = \$450

Note. FDA = Food and Drug Administration; FTE = full-time employee; VNRFRPS = Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards.

FIGURE 1

Example of an Inspection Summary Dashboard

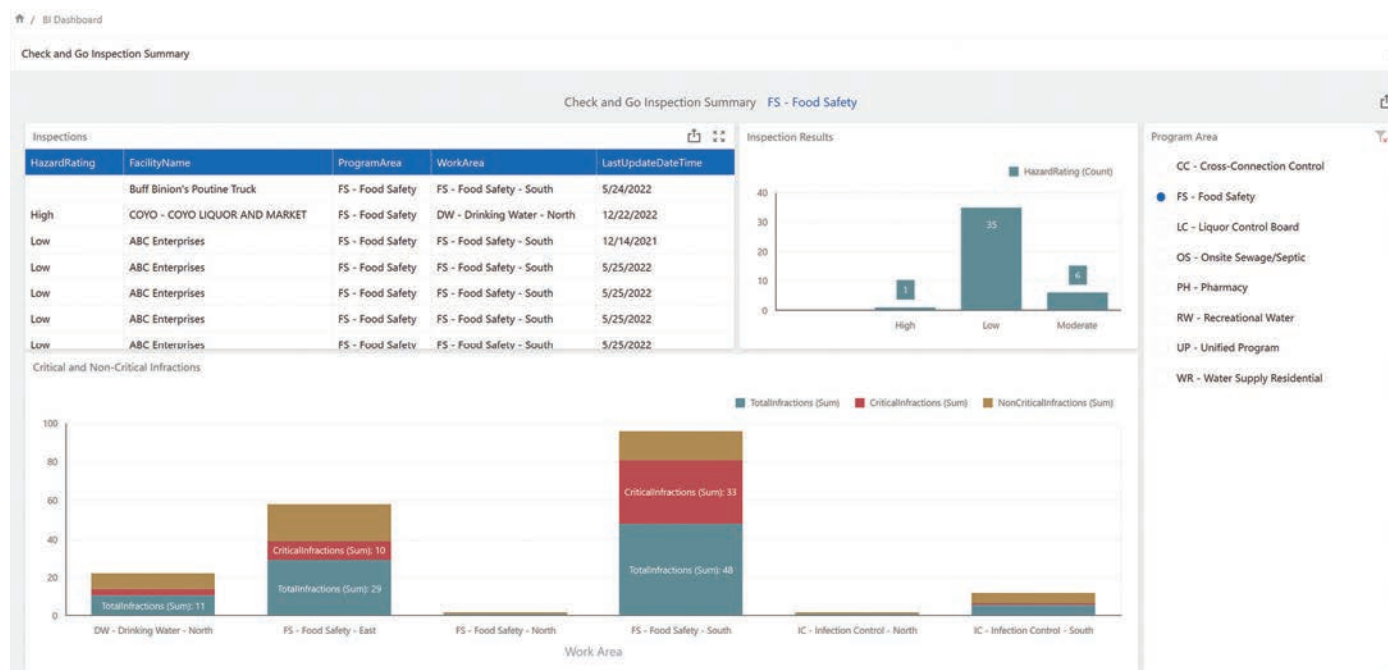


FIGURE 2

Example of the Clockify Data Entry Field

The screenshot shows a 'Time entry details' window. It includes fields for 'Start' (05:30), 'End' (06:30), and 'Duration' (01:00:00). Below these is a date field showing 'Thu, Mar 06'. A text area prompts the user to 'Write and edit JEH column.' Below this is a dropdown menu for 'JEH Column' with 'NEHA' selected. There are also checkboxes for '#mobile' and 'mobile', with 'mobile' checked. A 'Billable' toggle is at the bottom left. At the bottom are 'Delete' and 'SAVE' buttons.

training, sick days, special projects, and complications every day. So, one question for me to consider is how much detail to capture. I could record in 5-minute increments, 15-minute increments, or even by the hour.

Your agency's environmental health data system likely already tracks time. If so, there should also be reports and maybe even dashboards (Figure 1).

If your agency's data system does not track time or if your agency does not use a software solution, then you can always look for available apps. There are many—just search your favorite app store for “time tracking.”

For my purposes and research, I selected and have been using Clockify by cake.com. It

is free, works on all platforms (I have it on my work laptop, personal laptop, and phone), and it supports my core requirements, including:

- A timer
- Quick entry start and stop time
- A project field
- Task selection
- A notes section
- Summary reports

Additional features get unlocked with the paid version. On my Windows laptop, the data-entry screen looks like Figure 2. Then, with some accumulated days of time tracking, I can see where I have spent my time. I can see (and adjust if needed) my split between projects.

I expect to find that I have been drawn into other projects and tasks that take away from my targets. That is fine, too, because I will be ready to make some tweaks to my work plan or even adjust some behaviors.

So, in sum, tracking your time and activity thoroughly (even for a trial period) can be enlightening, both for your practices as well as practices for your agency. 🌸

Resources

- Standard 8 of the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) provides an initial model for resourcing the program: www.fda.gov/media/86864/download
- The Alternative Standard 8 Workbook 2023 from the Conference for Food Protection offers alternative models: www.foodprotect.org/guides-documents/alternative-standard-8-workbook-2023
- Standard 3 of the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards from FDA addresses assigning risk categories: www.fda.gov/media/86769/download
- The FDA 2022 *Food Code* Annex 5 establishes guidance on assigning risk categories and inspection frequencies: www.fda.gov/media/164194/download

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The *Journal* seeks guest authors for the Building Capacity column. Our goal is to provide a platform to share capacity building successes occurring across the country and within different sectors of the environmental health profession, including academia, private industry, and state, local, tribal, and territorial health agencies. Submissions will be reviewed by the NEHA technical advisors for data and technology and *Journal* staff for appropriate content, relevance, and adherence to submission guidelines. To learn more about the submission process and guidelines, please visit www.neha.org/contributors.

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