

## ► SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD



Rosie DeVito, MPH, PMP

## A Year of Resilience and Partnership

**Editor's Note:** The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide relevant and useful information through the pages of the *Journal* for environmental health professionals. In a recent membership survey, we heard your request for information that spotlights successful environmental health programs across the different areas of environmental health and from different sectors of the profession. We listened and are pleased to introduce a new column that shines a spotlight on success stories from the environmental health field. These stories enable us to learn from our peers and provide an avenue to incorporate successful programs, innovative solutions, and unique approaches to our own programs and initiatives.

The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA, our funders, or our partners.

Rosie DeVito is the program and operations manager of the NEHA-FDA Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Grant Program. She has worked for NEHA for 6 years.

### Introduction

The past year has been marked by both challenge and achievement. While funding level changes have created uncertainty, the retail food safety landscape continues to evolve and grow. Professionals in the environmental public health field are in a unique position to advocate for better programs and adapt to these uncertainties. Strength in partnerships with our federal partners, association partners, grantees, members, and jurisdictional communities has proven time and time again to be effective in achieving measurable, meaningful progress in retail food safety—ultimately public health outcomes.

This column showcases the collective efforts of the community targeted by the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA)-Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Grant Program to advance and uphold retail food safety through collaboration and data.

### Navigating Funding Challenges

In fiscal year 2025, FDA experienced budget reductions, resulting in fewer dollars available for public health programs, which increased competition among those programs. These cuts raised concerns that

state, local, tribal, and territorial retail food safety programs could lose access to crucial resources such as staffing, technology, and equipment. Without these resources, communities could face higher risks of foodborne illness outbreaks and related hospitalizations, along with increased healthcare costs and reduced quality of life.

Through all the uncertainty, the environmental public health field has adapted and remained committed to making progress. As the representative of the field, NEHA has committed to stewarding resources responsibly and effectively. For retail food safety, this commitment includes rethinking the way we administer the RFFM Grant Program. To achieve this, our team has prioritized embodying our strategic plan through thought leadership, constituent insight, collaboration, and data-driven decision-making to maximize impact with limited funding. While solutions we produced collaboratively do not solve all the problems, they still represent the adaptability and dependability of the workforce in an ever-changing landscape.

Due to limited funding for retail food safety programs, NEHA and FDA had to make the difficult decision to decrease individual funds for training and mentorship grants, eliminate special projects grants, and limit the number of capacity building grants. These modification decisions were largely based on data collected and analyzed from the previous 3 years of the program. While making these changes undoubtedly had an impact on what jurisdictions were able to do in 2025, we maintained that the program's strength lies in relationships, collaboration, and community. Despite a reduction in grant

categories, NEHA was able to provide at least partial support to 100% of eligible applicants. Our strategy is to continue to support and engage as many retail regulatory jurisdictions as possible, continuously growing the RFFM Grant Program. These changes allowed 375 jurisdictions from 38 states to receive some level of funding through the program, more than in any previous year.

## Grantee Successes

Funding constraints have undoubtedly changed the structure of the RFFM Grant Program in 2025. Still, retail food regulatory jurisdictions have persevered, making the most of the funds they received. While these changes have restricted what grantees could do, we have witnessed an incredible effort to maintain informal and formal relationships through mentorship and capacity building. In 2025, grantees formed 45 mentorship pairings that connected jurisdictions across multiple states. Many jurisdictions were not awarded mentorship funds, yet they still put time and effort into forming and sustaining relationships with other jurisdictions. This effort shows the value they find in programs such as mentorship.

Although only six jurisdictions received capacity-building awards, their efforts have focused on creating strong professional networks. Each grantee is engaging unfunded retail regulatory programs to exchange ideas, share resources, and provide peer support. By building new networks, maintaining existing networks, and connecting them through cohort meetings, these efforts create an exponential effect, expanding reach well beyond the original grantees. Collectively, capacity building projects aimed to involve 103 unfunded jurisdictions, and some have already exceeded their targets as momentum continues to grow.

These capacity-building and mentorship initiatives translate directly into stronger local retail food regulatory programs. Jurisdictions

are using these connections to sustain their environmental public health work, enhance food safety practices, and share proven strategies across communities. With continued, steady funding, this model not only helps programs maintain operations but also drives measurable improvements in public health, including fewer illnesses, fewer hospitalizations, and safer food for the public.

## Foundations of Progress

Throughout the tumultuous year, our partnerships with FDA, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), and others have brought a sense of stability and program continuity. Putting our heads together through a shared vision of food safety modernization and advancement, we developed and implemented creative solutions to the problems that funding limits were bringing to the program. Together, ensuring retail food safety remained relevant while keeping retail regulatory jurisdictions and their communities at the forefront led to the program being sustained throughout 2025.

To embrace the program's vision of data-driven decision-making, we have begun exploring publicly available datasets to assess the impact of the RFFM Grant Program on public health outcomes. By applying standardized methods of analysis, we are beginning to understand how participation in the program might influence rates of foodborne illness outbreaks. Preliminary findings suggest that jurisdictions engaged in the RFFM Grant Program experience fewer outbreaks when adjusted for size and social determinants of health. While this research is still ongoing, these efforts have already strengthened our data collection and analysis frameworks, enabling us to demonstrate measurable impacts of the program.

## Looking Ahead

Moving forward, we are excited to continue to grow programs like the NEHA-FDA RFFM

Grant Program. While funding levels remain unclear, our team, partners, and constituents are dedicated to adapting as the funding landscape changes. We are committed to supporting environmental public health, including retail food safety, through innovation and collaboration. Our data-driven approach allows us to continue uncovering long-term impacts of retail food safety programs like the NEHA-FDA RFFM Grant Program.

In the near future, we hope to bring back special projects and return to full funding levels. To help applicants plan ahead, we expect the portal for the 2026–2027 grant year to open in January 2026. Please see the promotion on page 5.

Together, we can work toward achieving a common goal—advancing a stronger, safer, more resilient food safety system. ✨

**Acknowledgment:** This project was funded by the NEHA-FDA RFFM Grant Program and supported by FDA under award 3U19FD008288. To learn more about the RFFM Grant Program, visit [www.neha.org/retailgrants](http://www.neha.org/retailgrants).

**Corresponding Author:** Rosie DeVito, MPH, PMP, Program and Operations Manager, NEHA-FDA RFFM Grant Program, National Environmental Health Association, 1400 Colorado Boulevard, Suite 325, Denver, CO 8022-3658. Email: [rdevito@neha.org](mailto:rdevito@neha.org)

Do you have a success story to share with our readership? We are looking for stories that highlight successes across all areas of environmental health—from air quality to zoonoses—that represent the different sectors of our profession. If interested, please contact Kristen Ruby-Cisneros at [kruby@neha.org](mailto:kruby@neha.org) for column guidelines.

## Did You Know?

Elevate your career and demonstrate your commitment to food safety excellence with our online, instructor-led training course for the Certified Professional–Food Safety (CP-FS) credential. Whether you are preparing for the challenging CP-FS credential exam or looking to expand your understanding of food safety science, this course is for you. Registration for the March 2026 course is open. Learn more at [www.neha.org/cpfs-vilt](http://www.neha.org/cpfs-vilt).