

► SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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Yolo County Environmental Health

Telling Your Jurisdiction's Story With the Food and Drug Administration's Voluntary Program Standards

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 publish this 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.

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It was 4 p.m. on the Monday evening before our jurisdiction was about to host our first-ever site visit as a mentor in the Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Mentorship Program when I received a notification from our public information officer: "The local television station is calling, wondering if you can provide an in-person interview for your temporary food vendor workshop tomorrow. Are you able to accommodate them?"

This request was slightly nerve-wracking and compounded my last-minute fretting over the final details for our 2-day site visit with our mentee, Humboldt County Environmental Health. Despite being busy, I jumped at the opportunity to share our story about how we are continuously improving our retail regulatory food program.

Our jurisdiction was excited to host our first site visit with our mentee. Previously, we had participated for 2-years in the RFFM

Mentorship Program as a mentee. Through these experiences, I gained insight into how different jurisdictions across the country were approaching the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (Program Standards) from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

One feeling I experienced as a mentee that resonated with me is that while environmental health jurisdictions share many commonalities, each jurisdiction is uniquely different. Each jurisdiction has its own story to tell. How jurisdictions approach the Program Standards depends on many circumstances—budgets, staffing, competing programmatic priorities, and local and statewide politics. The same approach for one jurisdiction might not necessarily work for another, and there is no "cookie cutter" approach to meeting the Program Standards. As a first-time mentor, I wanted to demonstrate to our mentees that though we can provide examples of how we have incorporated the Program Standards into our daily practice, how they decide to implement the Program Standards will be unique.

On the first day of the site visit, our food program inspection staff welcomed our mentee group with breakfast. Through my experiences as a mentee in this program, I have found that it is best to involve multiple staff members in the site visit rather than a sole representative. Including other staff in the preparation and process of a site visit is paramount to increasing buy-in to incorporating the Program Standards into a regulatory retail food program.

Our mentee had three participants from their organization, and we started the morning with an open dialogue about food safety issues each of our jurisdictions had been facing. It was important for us, as first-time mentors, to be paired with another California environmental health jurisdiction. There has been renewed interest among California jurisdictions to participate in the Program Standards after a long period of inactivity.

Our introductory discussion set a tone of camaraderie and an open exchange of ideas. We walked them through our temporary food vendor permitting workflow, and then later that afternoon, our mentees participated in a workshop open to the public that was geared toward temporary food vendors.

Between our morning session and afternoon workshop, I excused myself to my office for the live noon-hour news interview. The interview went well, but the reporter had asked offline whether they could cover the workshop in person. I agreed, but there were no other details about when or who from the station would arrive to cover our workshop.

Approximately 20 minutes into our workshop, a single cameraman arrived and began to set up his video camera. Fortunately, I had prepared my staff for the possibility of taping the workshop, and they kept their com-

posure in front of a group of 20 participants. After the cameraman captured some footage of the workshop, I informed him that I was the supervisor of the program that they had interviewed earlier. He looked relieved and asked if he could interview me outside. We quietly exited the workshop to set up outside, where he briefly interviewed me, which fortunately was not live this time. This interview was also successful and painted a positive picture of our role as educators and partners in protecting food safety.

The second day of our site visit was less frantic, but equally interesting. Our jurisdiction, like many others around the nation, is working to improve our foodborne illness outbreak response and preparedness. During the morning, we reviewed the elements of Program Standard 5, which focuses on foodborne illness outbreak investigations. We learned to identify contributing factors and how to use these factors to pinpoint the root cause of an outbreak. That afternoon, we participated in an interactive mock foodborne illness investigation, complete with actors playing the role of food handlers involved in the outbreak. That evening, we attended a local professional baseball game together.

Our final morning spent together centered on statewide food safety legislation, includ-

ing a proposed assembly bill to operate an open kitchen if an approved risk control plan is in place. While California has a robust network of local regulatory food technical advisory groups organized through the California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health to devise a uniform response to these types of matters, partnerships through the RFFM Mentorship Program strengthen our collaboration and connect us to a national consortium of food safety regulators.

As our mentoring journey continues for the remainder of the grant period with Humboldt County Environmental Health, I look forward to seeing their progress in the Program Standards. My hope is that they, too, weave in their food safety story into this scientifically based continuous improvement process. 🌸

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.

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