

## ▶ SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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## Our Journey With the Food and Drug Administration's Retail 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 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.

Jennifer Hatley serves as the director of environmental health for the Cabarrus Health Alliance, contributing over 26 years of expertise and leadership to the field. She brings a deep passion for food safety and public health to the communities she is dedicated to protecting.

I began my career in environmental health in October 1999 with the Stanley County Health Department in Albemarle, North Carolina. In June 2000, I began working at Cabarrus Health Alliance (CHA) in Cabarrus County, North Carolina. I have been a part of our environmental health team for almost 26 years. In that time, I have worked with incredible coworkers on my journey in environmental public health. I hold authorizations in food, lodging, and institutions; childcare and school sanitation;

public swimming pools; childhood lead poisoning prevention; body art; and private wells. My roles have expanded from being a registered environmental health specialist (REHS), team lead, program specialist, and environmental health supervisor to the director of environmental health. As my career broadens, promoting food safety through collaboration and education remains my greatest passion.

Several years ago, a coworker and I attended a training session hosted by the Food and Drug

Administration (FDA). Donna Wanucha, our FDA retail food specialist, approached us and encouraged us to pick up again the FDA Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (VNRFRPS or Retail Program Standards) and jump back in. Jump back in? We were unaware that our Food, Lodging, and Institutions program was enrolled in the Retail Program Standards, let alone what that acronym stood for.

We soon found out that our program was the first county in North Carolina to enroll in the Retail Program Standards back in March 2005. As she gave her elevator speech that day about the Retail Program Standards, what they were, why they existed, and what the goal was, she lit a spark within us that we had the potential to advance our program within CHA and could become leaders in food safety in our state. Donna had a vision for North Carolina counties enrolling in the Retail Program Standards, and she passed along her passion and enthusiasm at every opportunity. She mentioned that small grants were available to assist local programs with tools and equipment needs to promote food safety and education in our county.

In summer 2020, we pleaded our case to leadership, asking if we could apply for a Category 1 Small Projects grant from FDA and the Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO). Our environmental health program had not previously sought grants. Thankfully, they saw the excitement in our eyes and we applied for the equipment needs grant. We were awarded \$3,000 and purchased thermocouples, iPads for inspections, and translation software. It was like Christmas morning to our team.

We soon had the courage to apply for a larger grant, digging into the Retail Program Standards and recommitting our program to them. We learned that it is okay if your program had not been active after enrolling—there is always a path to jump back in. In October 2020, we applied for cohort 10 of the Mentorship Program offered by the National Association of County and City Health Officials to help evaluate and educate us on Standard 5 (Foodborne Illness and Food Defense Preparedness and Response) and Standard 7 (Industry and Community Relations). We received this funding and were paired with an amazing mentor: the Gwinnett, Newton, and Rockdale County Health Department (GNR Health) located in Georgia.

Soon, we began email introductions, virtual meetings, and ultimately, our mentor hosted an on-site visit. We chose Standards 5 and 7 for two specific reasons. First, Standard 7 is low-hanging fruit; we felt that our program was close to meeting this standard based on our September 2020 self-assessment and verification audit (SAVA). CHA provided resources on our programs webpage, created job aides for facilities, and participated in community food safety education. Second, we chose Standard 5 knowing that every jurisdiction needs to be prepared for the phone call that comes at 4:30 p.m. on Friday afternoon about a possible foodborne illness outbreak. We thought we were prepared, having experienced a fairly large foodborne illness event a few years prior. We learned that we needed to develop annual training for staff, participate in tabletop exercises with FDA and other counties, and be prepared with the resources to respond.

Working alongside GNR Health was amazing. Our experience with this mentorship program exceeded our expectations and provided the much-needed support to dive headfirst into the standards and move forward. They shared resources and evaluated our website, documents, policies, and procedures. We met Standards 5 and 7 by the end of our cohort. Most importantly, the cohort experience created networking opportunities with other jurisdictions that continue to grow.

In September 2021, we applied for the FDA/AFDO Inspection Equipment Needs Grant to support our program's purchase

of additional equipment. We were fully awarded this grant and again, were excited with the support this funding would provide our team.

Around the same time, the NEHA-FDA Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Grant was introduced. We participated in calls outlining the grant, specifically the Maintenance and Advancement Base grant, dreaming of the doors this funding could open. To apply, we needed a Comprehensive Strategic Improvement Plan (CSIP). Our FDA retail food specialist helped guide us through the process, reminding us that this plan is a living, working document and would be updated frequently. We developed our CSIP, and with the support of our leadership, we moved forward.

We applied for the 3-year Maintenance and Advancement Base grant, Mentorship grant (Mentor for Standard 7), and Training Opportunities grant. We were awarded all three. This achievement was a milestone in my career. Over those 3 years, the project would require dedication and hard work from the entire team. We conducted a baseline Risk Factor Study (RFS) with our food facilities and maintained Standards 5 and 7. In year 3, we met Standard 3 and worked on improvements on Standards 4 and 8. This RFS allowed us to identify areas within our food facilities that needed intervention to prevent foodborne illness and help close that gap.

To gain more knowledge about serving as a mentor for other jurisdictions and how to audit standards, we attended our first SAVA course. We met colleagues from other North Carolina counties who shared the same buy-in for the Retail Program Standards. We travelled to the annual meeting for the International Association of Food Protection to learn of other food safety initiatives and innovative solutions.

Over the last 3 years, we learned that many counties in North Carolina were also enrolled in the Retail Program Standards—some highly active, some less active, and some enrolled with no participation. Individual, like-minded colleagues from several counties were meeting to discuss the standards, share their progress, and collaborate. This group, along with Cabarrus County, was developing into what would become the North Carolina Retail Program Standards (NCRPS) Network.

We determined that we had the drive, support, and capability to apply for the 3-year RFFM Capacity Building grant. We were one of six awardees.

This grant is helping fund CHAs continual improvement, maintenance, and conformance with the Retail Program Standards and to employ a part-time coordinator for the standards. This coordinator position is shared between CHA and the NCRPS Network. Now, the NCRPS Network could formally develop, adopt a charter, form a board, and continue strengthening food safety programs across North Carolina and the nation. This collaboration continues to grow as neighboring counties work together to sustain these positive outcomes in our retail food programs.

The network identified inconsistencies and gaps across the state in how it responds to foodborne illness outbreak investigations. As a result, we decided to identify gaps, improve foodborne illness investigation procedures, and create a uniform complaint intake form. Since foodborne illness investigations often cross county lines, there is a need for communication and teamwork. As with many other efforts, the education, tools, and resources benefit all 100 counties in our state. We routinely work together, participating with other state networks, sharing resources, and collaborating. None of this work would be possible without the Retail Program Standards and the NEHA-FDA RFFM Grant Program.

If your jurisdiction is not involved, I highly encourage you to take the first step. Ask yourself, "Why not?" Start a discussion with your leadership to ensure buy-in, reach out to your FDA retail food specialist, and connect with enrollees nationwide. Lean into other programs—CHA and the NCRPS Network have learned that we are stronger together. ✨

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