

▶ SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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Strengthening Retail Food Programs Through Capacity Building and Collaboration in the Midwest

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 offer a 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.

David Boberg has worked in environmental health for more than 20 years. He is currently part of the Food and Feed Safety Division within the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). Since 2022, he has been the project coordinator overseeing MDA's conformance with the Food and Drug Administration's Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Retail Food Program has been enrolled in the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (Retail Program Standards) since 2001. Over the years, staff have worked diligently to incorporate aspects of the standards into the agency's routine activities. In 2024, the agency was verified to be in conformance with all

nine standards. Although this achievement was the result of persistence and sustained commitment, it would not have been possible without funding from the NEHA-FDA Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Grant Program. These grants provided dedicated staffing that enabled advancement of the internal Retail Program Standards, while also building momentum for the standards within the state and regionally.

During the 2022–2024 RFFM cycle, MDA was awarded multiple grant types. The Track 3 Base and Capacity Building Grants supported the hire of a full-time Retail Program Standards coordinator and ultimately contributed to MDA's achievement of full conformance with all nine standards in 2024. As part of this grant, MDA also launched a statewide Standards Community of Practice (CoP) that brought together state and local retail food safety agencies in Minnesota.

Over the 3-year grant period, five workshops were hosted focusing on Standards 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8. Each session included an overview, discussion of common challenges, review of clearinghouse issues, and work on practical examples. The workshops were typically attended by 20–34 participants who represented 10–16 different agencies. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and attendees expressed interest in continuing the CoP.

The Capacity Building Grant also supported the development of online interactive training modules for inspectors on topics including mobile food handlers, smoking and curing, sushi processes, and meat/seafood. The modules were finalized by the end of the grant, and most are available for continuing education units on MN Train (a local learning management system), and can also be accessed through the MDA Retail Food Program FoodSHIELD group or via a direct link. The trainings were designed to address common challenges and promote consistent inspection practices across agencies.

In 2024, MDA launched a Special Project Grant to develop an internal mentorship program to strengthen onboarding and improve

FIGURE 1

QR Code Used to Direct People to the Skills & Auditor Inventory Tool



staff retention in the Retail Food Program. A workgroup reviewed examples of successful mentorship structures and combined best practices into a set of tools, including a mentorship agreement, mentor/mentee guides, and training materials. The framework is adaptable and can be customized by any agency.

Under the current 2025–2028 grant cycle, MDA is continuing the Minnesota CoP Standards Network and is expanding the concept into a Midwest Regional Food Standards Network. The primary purpose of these networks is to build on and expand partnerships within the retail food regulatory community. The goal is to create a platform for shared resources where participants can learn from one another, identify efficiencies, and improve collaboration across the region. The ultimate goal is to advance the Retail Program Standards and strengthen food safety systems locally and regionally.

MDA has been collaborating with the Iowa Department of Inspections, Appeals,

and Licensing as co-leads on the project to develop the new regional network. This collaboration is supported by the highly competitive Capacity Building Grants that both agencies received—two of only six awards issued nationwide by the NEHA-FDA RFFM Grant Program for the 3-year grant period. The lead agencies hosted a kickoff meeting in October 2025 that attracted strong participation, followed by the first official meeting in January 2026, which drew 96 participants from 56 jurisdictions. The next meeting will be held in fall 2026. Future meetings will focus on specific standards, sharing self-assessment examples, and identifying unique aspects of auditing to foster that skill set. Agendas are shaped by direct survey feedback from attendees, which reinforces that the strength of the network lies in its members.

In addition to gathering multistate partners to collaborate on Retail Program Standards, another key deliverable is the development of

a Skills & Auditor Inventory (Figure 1). This tool can help agencies identify peers with experience in specific standards, either for general guidance or for verification auditors, and to find subject matter experts for more specialized topics such as HACCP plans, variances, standardization, plan review, and incident response. If you or a colleague have experience working on the Retail Program Standards or have a unique skill set, please consider sharing your talent with the greater environmental health community by adding your information to our inventory at <https://forms.office.com/g/GDW5CYWg8E>.

Even if your agency is not currently enrolled in the Retail Program Standards or has not worked on them recently, you are not alone. Many agencies are in the same position, and there is a strong community ready to support you. Although the program is voluntary, as reflected in its name, its components are foundational and essential to a strong quality food program, and there is no better time to get involved than now.

If you have questions about the Retail Program Standards and do not have a support network, I recommend reaching out to your FDA retail food specialist. If you already have a network and would like to share some of your activities or want more information about the resources developed by MDA, please feel free to reach out to me directly at david.boberg@state.mn.us.

The dedication and creativity within the environmental health community continues to inspire me. Even as resources grow tighter and expectations increase, our members consistently find innovative and practical solutions that strengthen our food safety systems. Stay motivated, keep the momentum, and remain open to learning from one another. Thank you for the important work you do every day to keep our communities safe. 🌸

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