

► SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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Progress in Motion: The 2026 Retail Program Standards Symposium

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 findings and conclusions of this column are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA, our funders, or our partners.

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Introduction

In April, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA)-Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Program held the 2026 Retail Program Standards Symposium (Symposium). The Symposium is a national educational event focused on strengthening retail food safety programs through professional development, peer learning, and collaboration around the FDA Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (Retail Program Standards). The Symposium

brings together retail food safety professionals from regulatory agencies, the retail food industry, and federal partners to share strategies and experiences related to Retail Program Standards conformance. This year's Symposium had a record 1,633 registrants, demonstrating the growing interest in Symposium programming.

The 2026 Symposium was built around the theme "Progress in Motion," emphasizing continuous improvement on the Retail Program Standards. Over the 3 days, participants attended sessions focused on workforce development, inspection consistency, strategic

planning, risk-factor interventions, and regulator–industry collaboration. Symposium educational sessions reflected an understanding that advancing conformance with the Retail Program Standards requires a trained workforce, sustained collaboration, and practical strategies that jurisdictions can adapt to their own programs.

Continuing Education

One of the primary goals of the Symposium is to strengthen the regulatory skills of retail food safety professionals while supporting progress toward Retail Program Standards implementation. The 2026 Symposium provided attendees with the opportunity to earn up to 12 hours of continuing education in a free virtual environment, making professional development more accessible for jurisdictions with limited travel or training resources. Continuing education is also a core component of FDA Retail Program Standard 2, which emphasizes maintaining a trained regulatory workforce capable of effectively conducting retail food safety activities.

In crafting the agenda, the Symposium planning team worked closely with FDA Retail Food Specialists, the Conference for Food Protection (CFP), and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO). Sessions focused on overcoming operational barriers and translating Retail Program Standards guidance into practical activities. Topics included staffing assessments, inspection consistency, strategic planning, workforce training systems, and approaches to begin Standards work.

Evaluation findings demonstrated that the Symposium successfully met this goal. In total, 88% of respondents reported that the Symposium met or exceeded expectations for continuing education opportunities. Participants consistently described Symposium sessions as relevant and directly applicable to their day-to-day responsibilities. Recordings of all Symposium sessions were also made available through NEHA following the event, extending access to continuing education resources beyond the live event (www.neha.org/rpss-recordings).

Peer-to-Peer Learning and Practical Insights

A major strength of the 2026 Symposium was its emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and practical implementation of the Standards. Sessions focused on operational experiences rather than theoretical discussions, helping participants better understand how jurisdictions addressed staffing limitations, funding constraints, risk-factor intervention strategies, and long-term Standards planning.

This approach allowed newer jurisdictions to learn directly from more experienced programs that had already navigated many of the same barriers. Evaluation data showed that participants particularly valued discussions on sustaining Standard 2 training systems, completing staffing assessments under Standard 8, and developing new approaches to industry outreach under Standard 7.

Other peer-led sessions highlighted strategies that attendees could apply within their own programs. A panel of RFFM Capacity Building grantees discussed strategies for developing regional retail food safety networks and sustaining cross-jurisdictional collaboration. Another session examined how the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection designed, planned, and implemented a mock foodborne illness simulation to support conformance with Standard 5.

Evaluation findings reinforced the value of these learning opportunities. Participants repeatedly identified practical application as one of the most valuable aspects of the Symposium. Respondents noted that hearing how peer jurisdictions approached implementation helped make the Standards feel more manageable and actionable within their own agencies. Many attendees also highlighted the value of exchanging tools and lessons learned with jurisdictions facing similar challenges.

Importantly, Symposium learning appears to translate into practice. Overall, 86% of respondents stated they were likely to apply information or tools gained from the Symposium within the next 6 months. This finding suggests that the Symposium functioned not only as a continuing education event but also as a workforce development and implementation support mechanism that directly contributed to ongoing Standards work within participating jurisdictions.

Federal and Industry Perspectives

The 2026 Symposium intentionally incorporated both industry and federal perspectives to strengthen collaboration across the retail food safety system. Planning discussions emphasized the importance of helping industry and regulatory professionals better understand one another's operational challenges, priorities, and expectations while also connecting participants with national leaders in retail food safety.

Industry-focused sessions provided insight into how the Standards impact retail food operators. Day 1 concluded with one of the Symposium's highest-rated sessions: a panel of retail food safety professionals from McDonald's, Wakefern, Publix, In-N-Out, and Whole Foods who discussed operational challenges, inspection consistency concerns, and regulator-industry collaboration. Participants also heard how the CFP process affects industry operations, helping foster greater understanding between regulators and operators.

Federal participation also played a significant role throughout the Symposium. FDA Retail Food Specialists, Retail Program Standards experts, and leaders involved in workforce development, education, and integrated food safety systems provided a national perspective and technical expertise across multiple sessions. Participants praised presentations led by FDA Retail Food Specialists for their clarity, technical depth, and practical implementation guidance.

More broadly, federal participation helped connect day-to-day Standards work within local jurisdictions to larger national retail food safety priorities. Survey respondents noted that keynote sessions and presentations focused on the future of retail food workforce development provided important context surrounding the long-term goals of

Standards implementation and integrated food safety systems.

Evaluation Findings

Overall, evaluation findings indicate that the 2026 Symposium was highly successful in supporting retail food safety professionals through practical education, peer learning, and implementation-focused training. Among the 158 evaluation respondents, overall satisfaction was exceptionally strong: 99% indicated that the Symposium was a valuable use of their time, and more than 98% agreed that it was well organized, relevant, and informative.

Participants consistently praised the professionalism of presenters; the virtual format; and the balance of federal guidance, peer learning, and industry collaboration. Respondents also reported increased understanding related to Standards implementation, workforce development, and risk-factor studies.

Respondents repeatedly identified practical application as the most valuable aspect of the Symposium. Sessions featuring operational examples, implementation tools, templates, and peer-driven case studies were especially well received. Many respondents noted that the Symposium helped translate the Retail Program Standards into manageable and actionable activities that could be applied within their own jurisdictions.

Evaluation findings also identified several opportunities to strengthen future Symposium planning. Participants expressed interest in additional standards-specific workshops, operational case studies, interactive learning activities, and expanded networking opportunities. Respondents also requested more guided exercises, implementation workshops, and peer discussion sessions.

Conclusion

The 2026 Retail Program Standards Symposium reinforced the value of practical, peer-driven continuing education in supporting retail food safety professionals nationwide. Evaluation findings demonstrated strong appreciation for implementation-focused training, networking, and collaboration with FDA and industry leaders. Participant feedback identified opportunities to expand future programming through additional workshops, interactive exercises, and more networking opportunities. The Symposium planning team will use these evaluation findings to ensure

future Symposium content continues to meet the evolving needs of retail food safety professionals. NEHA remains committed to providing accessible, collaborative education that supports continuous improvement and advancement of the Retail Program Standards nationwide through the Symposium. 🌸

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