

▶ BUILDING CAPACITY



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Capacity Building for Retail Food Regulatory Programs

Editor's Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the practice of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the *Journal* publishes the Building Capacity column to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

The content and conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA or its programs.

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Capacity building is the improvement in an individual's or organization's facility (or capability) to produce, perform, or deploy. Community capacity building is a long-term continual process of development that involves all stakeholders as opposed to practices that limit oversight and involvement in interventions with governments. The list of parties defined as community includes local authorities, nongovernmental organizations, professionals, community members, academics, and more.

A widespread failure to invest in public health has left local and state health departments struggling to respond to outbreaks, which makes these departments ill-prepared to face the swelling crisis. Many health

departments are suffering from budget and staffing cuts, yet still manage a vast, but often invisible, portfolio of duties. Nationwide, local and state health departments have lost nearly one quarter of their workforce since 2008 (Grenadier, 2020).

Several federal agencies and other organizations want to help health departments. One such funding program to assist health departments is the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA)-Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Retail Flexible Funding Model (RFFM) Grant Program (NEHA, 2022a). The grant provides funding to state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) retail food regulatory agencies as they advance conformance with the FDA Voluntary National

Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (Retail Program Standards).

The FDA Retail Program Standards serve as a guide to regulatory retail food program managers in the design and management of a retail food regulatory program and provide a means of recognition for those programs that meet the standards (FDA, 2022). Program managers and administrators can establish additional requirements to meet individual program needs. The Retail Program Standards are designed to help food regulatory programs enhance the services they provide to the public. These programs represent an important component of a comprehensive strategic approach to help ensure the safety and security of the food supply at the retail level.

Introduced in 2021 for calendar year (CY) 2022 of the NEHA-FDA RFFM Grant Program, a Capacity Building Optional Add-On Grant of up to \$100,000/year was offered to develop a 3-year project or initiative that advances SLTT retail food programs by collaborating with stakeholders involved in retail food safety (NEHA, 2022b). From the grant guidance, the "project or initiative would leverage the strengths, knowledge, tools, and other resources of collaborators to further city-wide, multi-county, regional, statewide, or national conformance with the Retail Program Standards" (NEHA, 2022b, p. 9). This grant could also be utilized to fund a Retail Program Standards coordinator position.

A total of 26 Capacity Building Grants were awarded for CY 2022 (NEHA, 2022c). While the Capacity Building Optional Add-On Grant is not being offered in the CY 2023 project year, there are project options from that category for health departments to consider if they

want to build their capacity. Health departments might be able to identify projects that they can fund through their own budgets or that they can collaborate on with other agencies and partners.

Possible Capacity Building Projects

We can glean some valuable project ideas from the CY 2022 Capacity Building Add-On Grant (NEHA, 2022b).

- Develop and implement a software system that supports elements of your retail food inspection program. The software should allow your agency to manage and monitor risk-based food inspection programs, as well as provide the ability to use the data to mitigate challenges and devise strategic interventions. The deployment of a fully web-based data management system for food safety inspections should enable agencies to efficiently comply with the Retail Program Standards. Furthermore, this deployment should allow multiple departments in the state or within a local area to standardize to the same platform and the Retail Program Standards.
- Purchase and use innovative technologies that can facilitate continuous improvement among jurisdictions toward conformance with the Retail Program Standards.
- Purchase software that can assist with the tracking of projects developed toward conformance with the Retail Program Standards that can be shared with or interfaced by other jurisdictions.
- Implement comprehensive intervention strategies for reducing foodborne illness risk factors.
- Implement activities that encourage collaboration among food safety stakeholders, such as food safety advisory boards, councils, or task forces.
- Hire or reassign existing staff to specifically manage and coordinate advancement in the Retail Program Standards, including oversight of standards-focused projects to encourage collaboration with other SLTT jurisdictions that are enrolled in the Retail Program Standards.
- Develop approaches that facilitate the delivery of FDA *Food Code* standardizations that meet the intent of criteria for Retail Program Standard 2 within multiple jurisdictions.

Software Solutions

Managing, monitoring, and maintaining databases and all the information your agency collects using typical computer software programs (e.g., Microsoft Excel) might not be feasible these days. Agencies might need to turn to a software system that can provide robust tools for data management to be effective and efficient.

While each department will have different needs and demands for a system to manage its databases and programs, there are a few capabilities to keep in mind. For example, software solutions should:

- Provide total alignment with FDA *Food Code* language including foodborne illness risk factors and good retail practices.
- Allow agencies to capture and track all training-related details as required in the Retail Program Standards and much more.
- Include risk factor-based categorization and allow agencies to design risk-based inspection scheduling.
- Include FDA standard compliance status (i.e., in compliance, out of compliance, NA [not applicable], NO [not observed]) and force the users to choose what is only approved for the type of violation.
- Allow policy-based actions that are specific to the agency, such as corrected on-site, follow-up inspections, corrective action plans, and other similar enforcement actions.
- Provide a foodborne illness tool that is fully aligned with FDA standards and that requires mandatory information gathering during complaint intake and investigations and reporting.
- Provide laboratory support, analytical reports, and ad-hoc reports. Traceback and recall procedures should be easily captured in the system and allow an on-demand checklist creation for disasters and unplanned events.
- Include a robust compliance and enforcement workflow tool to fully implement compliance protocols of the agency. For example, a follow-up inspection can be created automatically based on the risk factors identified during an inspection.
- Allow a robust interactive platform online for the regulated industry and local residents. Inspection results and license applications and renewals (including payments) should be included in the system.

It is time to consider the addition of technology solutions for your agency. 🗣️

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