

Environmental Health Specialist Food Safety Educator Needs Assessment: Summary

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As part of a USDA CSREES grant, six focus group sessions were held June 24, 2008 at the annual NEHA meeting in Tucson, AZ. A total of 30 participants attended one of the six 50 minute sessions. Participants were NEHA annual conference attendees and nearly all stated they had a food safety training and education role in their job. A series of questions related to food safety at retail and foodservice were asked. Individual focus group sessions were asked the same questions, however, some groups focused on different questions or topics more than others. Below are the consensus responses.

- 1- **Is food safety lacking at the retail-foodservice level and why?** The consensus of the focus groups was that food safety at the retail and food service level has tremendous room for improvement. Many operators fail to use critical food safe behaviors despite training. Individual comments on why food safety practices were lacking included: it takes longer to be safe or it is inconvenient, operators do not understand why (lack basic knowledge of) food safety practices are required or simply don't care, operators practice unsafe food practices at home and bring that experience with them to work, operator management does not provide the correct incentives (training, motivation, supervision and reward) to get food safe behaviors.
- 2- **Is training and education needed and does it work?** The consensus answer was that training and education is critical to food safety at the retail and foodservice level, but that even restaurants closed due to critical violations had received food safety training. There were many mixed responses to whether training worked. Some felt that the quality of training directly impacted success. Quality factors included: culturally and language adapted to audience, student motivation, management buy-in, training should be ongoing or have follow-ups, and training results should be assessed (is it working?). Some participants focused on the quality of trainers themselves –“training is only as good as the trainer”. The trainers were critical to the quality of the training: experience, subject knowledge, fresh materials, motivators, rapport with group, and had ability to “teach” and not “lecture” (lecturing was information dissemination and teaching was to achieve learning by the students). The last comment prompted discussion on the practice of training strictly to pass an exam. Participants felt that was poor quality training. Another topic that prompted much discussion was “is my training working and how do I know?” All participants who were asked felt they were comfortable with their training and program. However, they were uncomfortable with many of the details of their students and their training programs. Most participants expressed that their training and educational program could be improved. The consensus of the focus groups was that often they just “hope” their training works and very much would like methods to assess their trainings.

- 3- **What are some barriers to learning and practicing food safety by operators?** Focus group participants indicated a variety of responses including: diverse students, languages, time, money (cost of training), literacy, socioeconomic standards, lack of interest, cultural differences, skill level requirements (career level vs. non-), motivation of employees, operator doesn't have time, and lack of feedback on safe food behaviors. Participants expressed a common theme for a barrier to food safety was many people know better, but don't practice safe food behaviors anyway. They felt management did not emphasize food safety as a priority and they were burdened with more pressing tasks.
- 4- **What are your needs in food safety training and education?** The overwhelming response from participants was that materials and resources for teaching were needed. These included: posters, photos, illustrations, signs, fact sheets, case studies, stories ("facts tell, stories sell"), audio or video materials (especially for low literacy), ... Foreign language materials were frequently mentioned as a critical need. Participants felt that materials are available but they spend considerable time and effort to search for them. A big concern was copyright. Many resources are not clear as to the copyright holder or whether the material is public domain. When resources are found, participants expressed concern on quality and accuracy (science-based). One participant expressed concern that his state required approval of all materials that often could take many months to a year. Most participants wanted materials they could modify for their audience and customize to their affiliation. Others wanted a place to send operators to get materials for their own training and use. Another answer to this question centered on trainers. Funding for training was poor, some (regulatory and operator) trainers are very poor communicators and even poorer teachers, some lack an understanding of ethnic foods or newer processing techniques, and some fail to offer any follow up or assessment of their training. The consensus of the focus groups was to provide resources to address these issues.
- 5- **Where do you find the materials discussed above and where would you like to find materials?** Participants expressed that there were 1000's of resources spread out all over the internet. They would search the web sites of: NEHA, FDA, STOP, Marlar Clarke, Foodsafe, State NEHA affiliates, State Health Departments, active local health departments, CDC, and Google. Most expressed concern that the websites were too extensive and complex. Participants would like a common source or collection of copyright free material and resources. They would encourage the RSFC to work with its partners (NEHA, AFDO, and IAFP) to have an online library of resources. They would prefer peer reviewed materials, but not an extensive collection. Let users make modifications rather than have many variations of one resource. Participants also expressed a desire for a list serve or bulletin board to rate resources and communicate with other educators on the materials collection.
Participants were asked if they had materials to share or upload to a collection? Nearly all had materials to contribute and would do so.

A quote from a participant sums up the focus group, "our problems are common – we need to share knowledge and experiences".

Retail Food Safety Consortium: Where do we go from here? This summary focus group data will be used to create a survey instrument. A larger number of food safety educators will be surveyed via NEHA

to quantitate their agreement or disagreement with focus group observations. The data will provide a base line needs assessment to guide year two and three grant activities. Purdue University is currently creating the RFSC website and will include the materials database and bulletin board as requested by educators in the needs assessment. RFSC partners will need to explore methods to locate and contribute the requested materials and to review them for scientific accuracy.

The 2009 AFDO-RFSC collaboration meeting should focus on “sharing food safety resources and best practices” and to discuss state level regulator (1) participation and (2) facilitation of this endeavor.

For participation we recognize most food safety education materials already exist and the appropriate people to work with are the state level food safety educators. We would encourage AFDO members to identify the most appropriate individuals in their state programs. In some cases these people may not be AFDO members directly. The focus would then be to work with educators to identify and agree upon a process for collecting and peer reviewing food safety materials. The second emphasis in the AFDO-RFSC partnership would be to explore how AFDO members can facilitate sharing resources and best practices, e.g. can AFDO provide an outlet for state level educators to collaborate, how can state programs (administrators) support their own food safety education programs and local programs within their state, what methods exist to share resources across states and to locals (improving those channels), how can AFDO and the AFDO Virtual membership program help, what states serve as point contacts for local jurisdictions, and what barriers exist for the collaborations proposed.

Proposed AFDO-RFSC Collaboration Activities 2008-2010.	
Participation	AFDO-RFSC facilitated webinars or web conferences (2-4) highlighting shared resources and best practices which address needs raised in the NEHA focus group and followup survey. Identify and agree upon a recommended process for collecting and peer reviewing food safety materials.
Facilitation	AFDO committee charges addressing state regulator facilitation of sharing resources and best practices in food safety education followed by a 2-3 hour state and federal management roundtable at the AFDO 2009 Annual meeting in Chicago to review initial findings, project status and recommendations arising out of AFDO.