

Impact of the NACCHO Retail Program Standards Mentorship Program on Retail Food Regulatory Programs



Introduction

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (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 these Standards."¹ Ultimately, the Retail Program Standards are intended to support retail food regulatory agencies in preventing foodborne illnesses and deaths in local communities across the United States. This aim is met by providing the sector with the foundation for the continuous improvement of food safety regulatory programs by advancing processes driving the way foods are prepared and served within the nation's food industry.

The Retail Program Standards consist of nine standards, including the following:

- Standard 1: Regulatory Foundation
- Standard 2: Trained Regulatory Staff
- Standard 3: Inspection Program Based on Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) Principles
- Standard 4: Uniform Inspection Program
- Standard 5: Foodborne Illness and Food Defense Preparedness and Response
- Standard 6: Compliance and Enforcement
- Standard 7: Industry and Community Relations
- Standard 8: Program Support and Resources
- Standard 9: Program Assessment

Since 1999, the FDA has strongly encouraged jurisdictions that regulate food service and retail food establishments to enroll in the Retail Program Standards. With over 770 jurisdictions enrolled to date, including over 600 local health departments, the FDA provides resources and guidance to help agencies implement the Retail Program Standards.

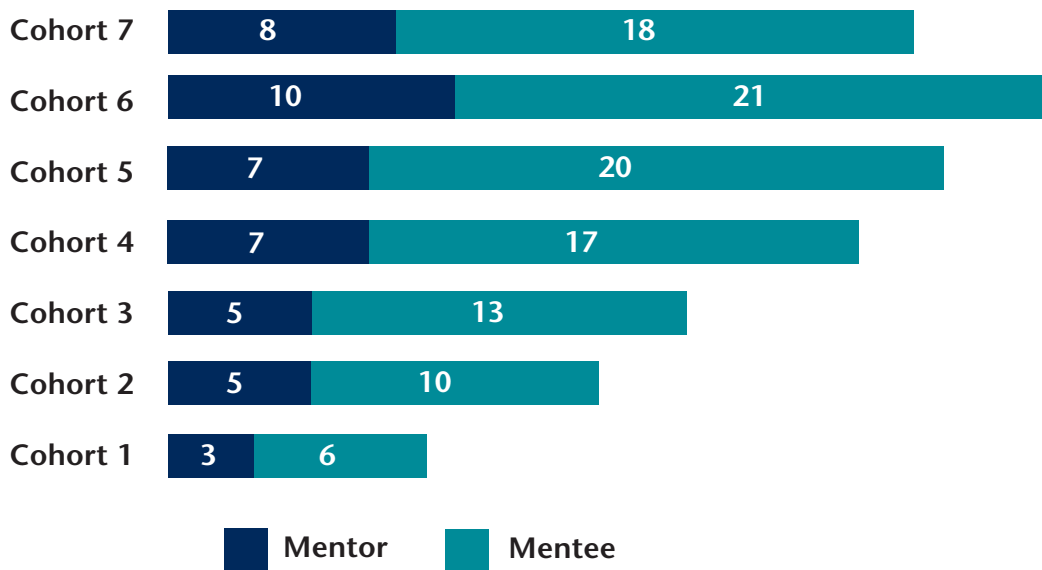
Local health departments play a major role in ensuring the food



people eat every day is safe. In the United States, approximately 3,000 entities regulate food safety. The vast majority of these entities are local retail food regulatory programs; at least 77% of the 2,800 local health departments in the United States educate, inspect, or license retail food establishments.²

Through a cooperative agreement with the FDA, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) established a mentorship program in 2012 to support retail food regulatory programs in implementing the Retail Program Standards. The program provides peer-to-peer assistance and intensive technical support to ensure entities facilitate the standards efficiently and effectively. Experienced retail food regulatory program staff advise newer agency representatives on how to get started, overcome challenges, and best apply the Retail Program Standards to further their food protection programs. Participants also gain insight on developing and implementing policies and procedures, completing self-assessments, and conducting verification audits. Since inception, over \$1.4 million has been invested in the mentorship program, which has been used to provide 150 awards to retail regulatory food programs. As seen in Figure 1, on the following page, this program has also experienced continued growth. As a result,

FIGURE 1: TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN EACH COHORT (COHORTS 1 - 7)



participants now include local health departments from all across the nation (Figure 2). Compared to the inaugural cohort of nine local health departments, the program has nearly tripled in size, engaging 26 agencies in the seventh and most recent cohort.

The mentorship program period is typically nine to 10 months long. However, participants often have seven to eight months to make progress on their work plan after refining and finalizing their goals and objectives with their mentors. Upon completion, participating agencies typically achieve all or the majority of their goals. Additionally, as a result of the mentor-mentee relationship, program participants are able to foster meaningful relationships to help them sustain efforts on the Retail Program Standards in the future.

To better understand the impact of the Retail Program Standards and the mentorship program on participating retail food regulatory programs, NACCHO conducted a retrospective survey and a review of final reports collected from the first five mentorship program cohorts.

Methods

In 2017, NACCHO developed and administered an electronic assessment to 64 individuals representing enrolled agencies within the first five cohorts of the mentorship program. In conjunction with a review of 123 final reports submitted by participants from the first six cohorts, NACCHO sought to explore the following four factors:

- Retail Program Standards impact on retail food regulatory programs.
- The mentorship program’s impact on retail food regulatory programs’ (1) conformance with the Retail Program

Standards; (2) communication with their governing entity regarding their retail food program; (3) adherence to the Public Health Accreditation Board requirements; and (4) staff.

- Success stories with the mentorship program and Retail Program Standards.
- Challenges with the mentorship program and Retail Program Standards.

Findings and Results

GENERAL INFORMATION

The assessment had a response rate of 67% (43 respondents). Among the respondents, 32 individuals were mentees, seven were mentors, and four were both mentees and mentors.

NACCHO collected the final reports from 123 participants from the first six cohorts of the mentorship program. Among the final reports submitted, 84 were from mentee agencies and 39 were from mentor agencies.

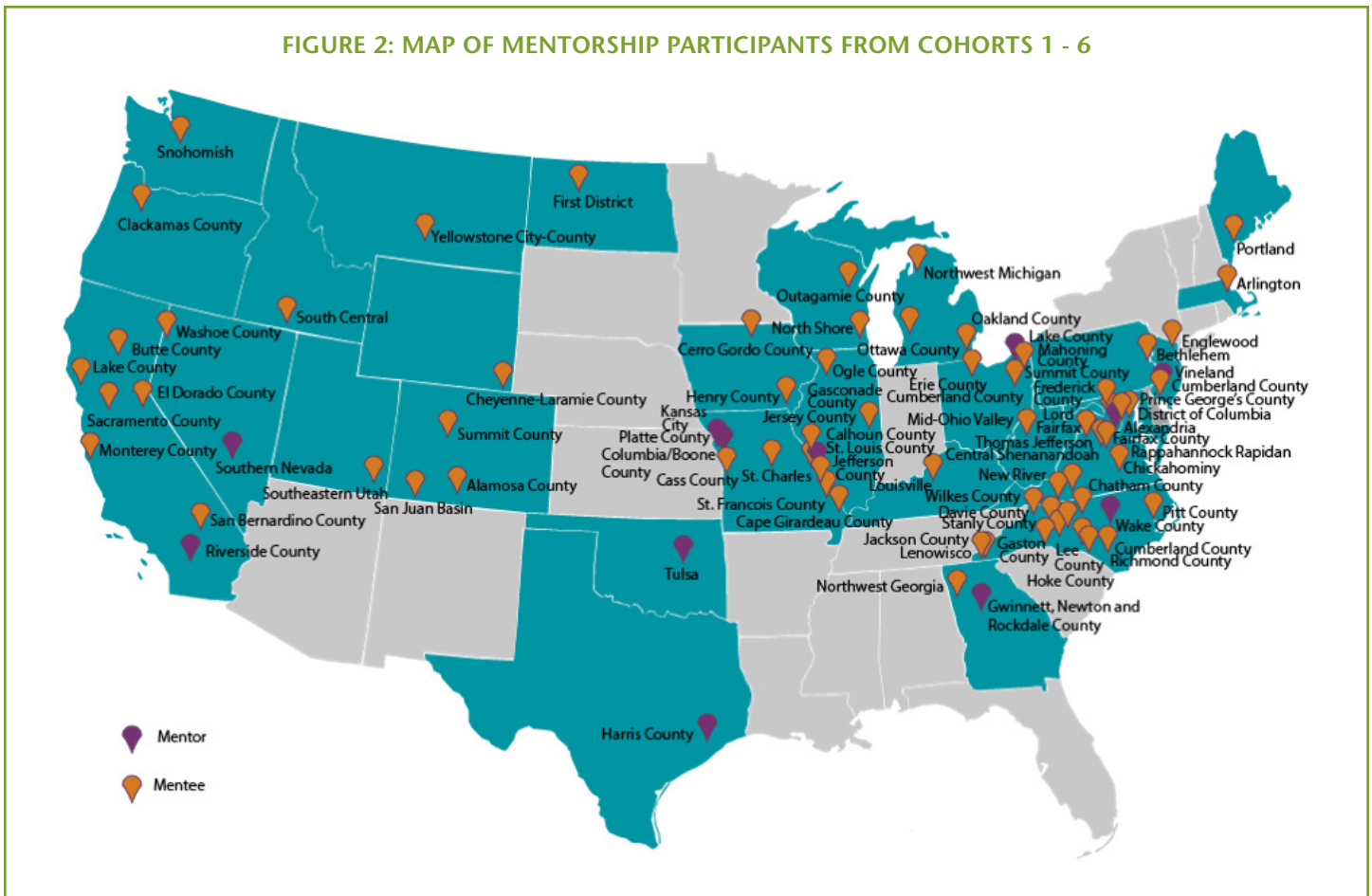
RETAIL PROGRAM STANDARDS IMPACT

NACCHO asked respondents six overarching questions about the impact of the Retail Program Standards on their health departments.

When asked if making progress on or achieving the Retail Program Standards allowed for better identification of retail food program areas in which their agencies can have the greatest impact on retail food safety, 95% of the respondents (41) answered “Strongly Agree” or “Agree.”

Nearly 90% of respondents (38) answered that they “Strongly

FIGURE 2: MAP OF MENTORSHIP PARTICIPANTS FROM COHORTS 1 - 6



Agree” or “Agree” that participating in the Retail Program Standards enabled staff to promote wider application of effective risk-factor intervention strategies in their agencies.

All respondents answered that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that the Retail Program Standards assisted their agencies in identifying program areas most in need of additional attention regarding retail food safety. In addition, over 85% of respondents (37) answered that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that the Retail Program Standards served as a means of justification for agency leadership (e.g., Board of Health, executive management) related to decisions for maintaining or increasing food safety program budgets.

In addition, 95% of the respondents (41) “Strongly agree or Agree” that the Retail Program Standards led to innovations (e.g., approaches to build a program, improvement in inspection processes/procedures, consumer relations, etc.) in program implementation and administration. Over 85% of the respondents (37) answered that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that the Retail Program Standards improved industry and consumer confidence in their retail food protection programs.

Mentorship Impact on Participants

Based on the final reports submitted by members of the first five cohorts, all mentees made significant progress towards

their work plan’s goals and objectives and more than half met their entire work plan’s goals and objectives. Common work plan items included meeting components of Standard(s), meeting a specific Standard, conducting a self-assessment, developing improvement plans, and conducting verification audits. Figure 3 illustrates the number of projects that mentees completed or achieved significant progress towards completing, categorized by Standard. Many mentees were newly enrolled in the Retail Program Standards and were able to conduct an initial self-assessment of all nine standards (31). Other popular Retail Program Standards included Retail Program Standard 2: Trained Regulatory Staff (21) and Retail Program Standard 7: Industry and Community Relations (15). Throughout all six cohorts, participants voiced their challenges with conformance to Retail Program Standard 8: Program Support and Resources due to their agency’s lack of resources and funding to meet the Standard. Only four participants chose to work on this Standard and one participant was successful in making significant progress during the mentorship program period, reflected in Figure 3.

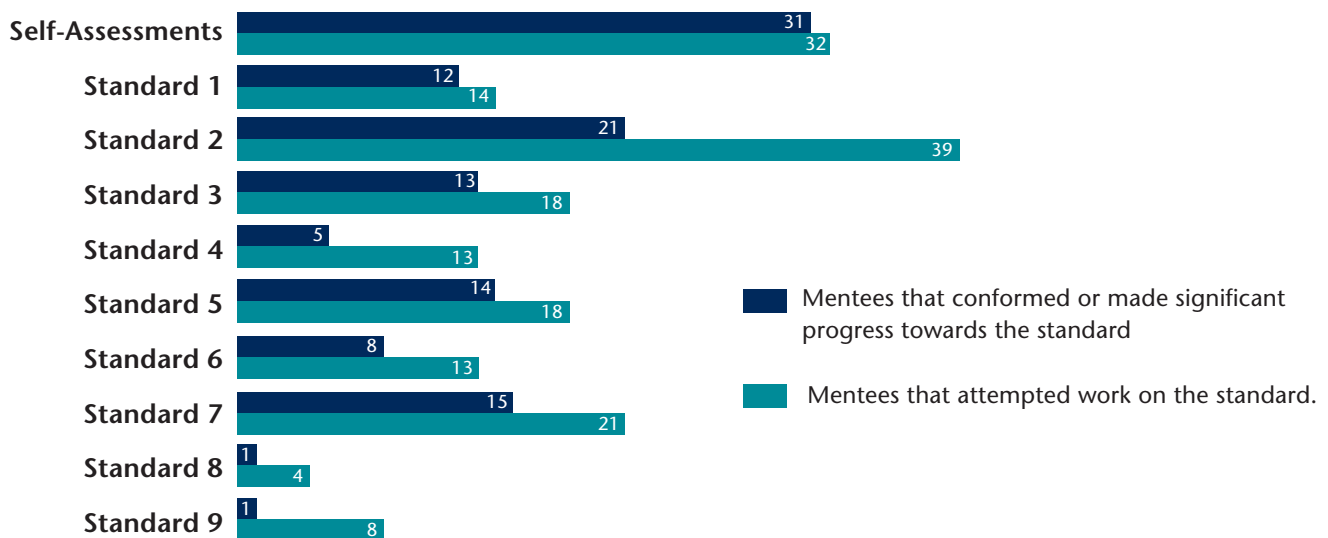
The mentorship program has enabled participants to enhance their retail food programs and staff. When working on the mentorship program, 97% of the participants (120) formed workgroups and getting more than one staff member involved in the Retail Program Standards. Other benefits of the mentorship program included the following:

- 72% of mentees (62) updated or created Standard policies and forms (e.g. food service inspections policy and procedure manuals, training plans for inspectors, quality assurance policies, operational procedures for standardizations, HACCP inspection processes, education materials, customer surveys, foodborne illness preparedness and response manuals, etc.).
- 63% of funded participants (67) used funding to support retail food program staff salaries.
- 63% of mentees (54) completed a standard or conducted a self-assessment of all nine standards.
- 61% of funded participants (65) used funding to purchase inspection related supplies.
- 57% of funded participants (60) used funding to attend a conference or training related to the Retail Program Standards.

In addition to meeting or making significant progress toward meeting the Retail Program Standards, both mentees and mentors stated that their staff benefited from participation in the program. Other benefits included the following:

- A deeper understanding of the benefits related to making progress toward meeting the Retail Program Standards;
- Recognition of participants within their agency as subject matter experts on the Retail Program Standards;
- Ability to network and interact with other health departments in the mentorship program;
- Ability to identify and pursue additional resources available to help conform to Retail Program Standards;
- Increased staff skills learned through attending trainings at FDA courses and seminars, HACCP training, and association conferences;

FIGURE 3: MENTEES IN COHORTS 1 - 6 CONFORMED OR MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS* TOWARDS THE FOLLOWING STANDARDS



*Significant progress is defined as a mentee self-reporting that they are close to meeting the Standard.

- Knowledge on improving interactions and relationships with retail food industry; and
- Improved public speaking skills from presenting and discussing the Retail Program Standards.

The final reports also included numerous success stories about the positive impact the mentorship program and the Retail Program Standards have had on their retail food programs. Through participation in the mentorship program, respondents indicated they were able to do the following:

- Connect with a peer network to support their work on the Retail Program Standards;
- Provide food safety training to the public;

- Provide evidence of the need for additional food safety program staff;
- Apply for additional funding opportunities for the Retail Program Standards;
- Use funding for inspectional supplies and equipment needed for the Retail Program Standards and retail food safety program;
- Gain staff buy-in and support for the Retail Program Standards; and
- Develop and/or improve standardized inspection procedures and policies.

Long-Term Impact of the Mentorship Program

In the 2017 assessment, NACCHO asked mentorship participants about the impact of the mentorship program on their retail food protection program since their participation in the program, shown in Figure 4. The results demonstrate that participants in the mentorship program were able to achieve conformance to one or more Retail Program Standards and others continue to progress towards full conformance of one or more Retail Program Standards. Retail Program Standards 2 and 9 were the most popular standards included in participants' work plans. The next most popular standard was Retail Program Standard 7, with eight respondents stating that they were able to conform to it.

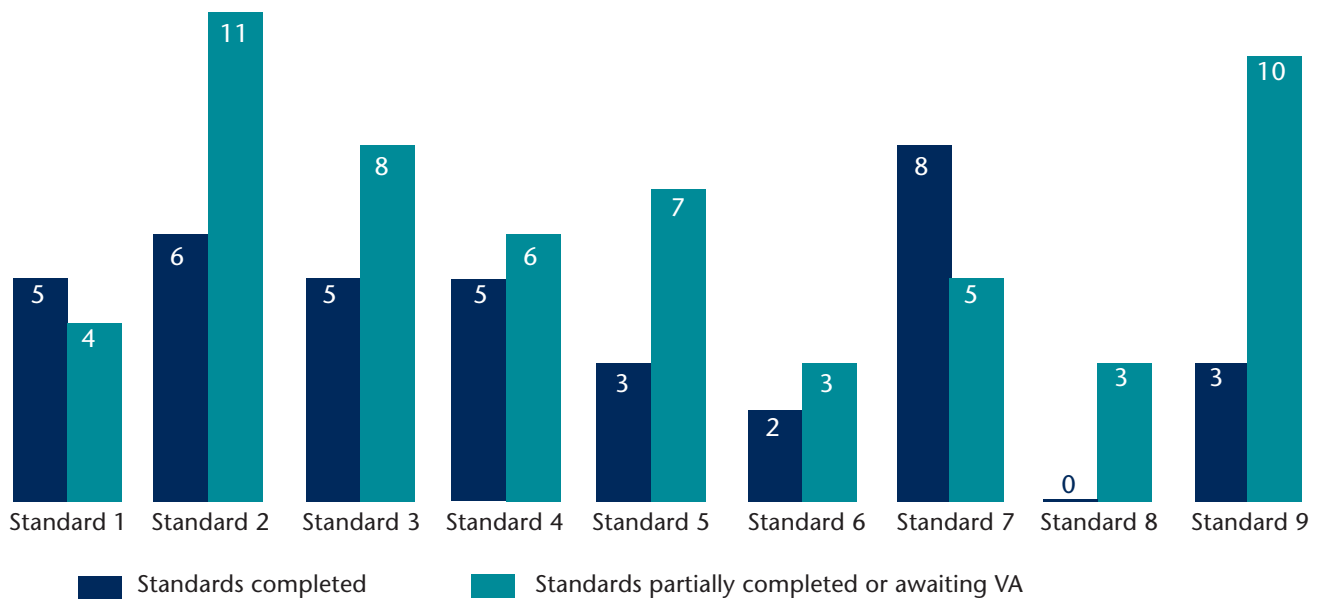
All respondents answered that they either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that the mentorship program has stimulated quality and performance improvement opportunities within their agencies. Furthermore, participants indicated that the program helped their agencies in better identifying strengths and weaknesses in their retail food program. When asked if the mentorship program helped their agencies better communicate

about the retail food program with their Boards of Health or governing entities, 84% of participants (36) responded that they "Strongly Agree" or "Agree." More than half of participants (24) reported that they "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" that the mentorship program helped their agency meet requirements of the Public Health Accreditation Board.

All mentees stated that participating in the Mentorship Program has helped their agency achieve or make significant progress on the Retail Program Standards and that NACCHO staff provided helpful guidance, resources, and materials during the program. Over 90% of respondents (38) stated that FDA staff provided helpful guidance, resources, and materials, which also furthered progress during the mentorship program.

About half of respondents (23) reported experiencing at least some problems or challenges related to making progress on the Retail Program Standards during the mentorship program, which 70% attributed to competing priorities and limited resources. Other challenges included travel costs and time, incompatible mentor, finding an auditor, lack of leadership support, lack of staff buy-in, state-level issues, NACCHO reimbursement procedures, and issues with their agencies' software company.

FIGURE 4: STANDARDS COMPLETED VS. STANDARDS PARTIALLY COMPLETED/AWAITING VA SINCE MENTORSHIP APPLICATION



Participation in the mentorship program enabled 86% of respondents (37) to continue working on the Retail Program Standards after the mentorship program ended. Respondents gave various reasons for why they chose to continue working on the Retail Program Standards after the mentorship program, including the following:

- The completion of the self-assessment during the mentorship program enabled them to secure FDA grant funding to support work on the Retail Program Standards.
- The elements of the Retail Program Standards have been permanently interwoven into their food safety program.
- The work on the Retail Program Standards has been a continuous process to evaluate and improve retail food inspection programs.
- The mentorship program provided the opportunity to meet others who can serve as resources, which directly supported involvement in the Retail Program Standards.

[REPORT]

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In addition, 88% of respondents (38) stated that their agency has used resources and contacts from the mentorship program to continue work on the Retail Program Standards. Respondents reported staying connected with the program participants in the following ways:

- Respondents reached out to peers for resources or guidance on programmatic issues beyond the Retail Program Standards.
- Respondents used FoodSHIELD, an online platform that allows public health and food regulatory officials at the local, state, and federal levels across the nation to securely work together to share and borrow resources and conduct verification audits for their peers.
- Respondents thought the mentorship program encouraged a “family tree” dynamic with other participants. Participants remain connected with each other and form new connections when new participants join the program.

Conclusion

The results of the survey and final progress reports from the first five cohorts illustrate that the NACCHO mentorship program has successfully increased local health departments’ participation in and conformance with the Retail Program Standards. The benefits of the mentorship program extend well beyond the mentorship program period for many of the participants. The program has also met the FDA’s goal of strengthening the role of local health departments’ regulatory programs, which protect retail food in the United States.

NACCHO is continuing to partner with the FDA to administer the mentorship program. In the sixth cohort, NACCHO opened the program to all retail food regulatory programs, including the addition of state, territorial, and tribal programs. Pending on the availability of funding, NACCHO anticipates recruiting the eighth cohort in the fall of 2018.

References

1. Food and Drug Administration. Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards webpage. Retrieved September 6, 2017, from <https://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/RetailFoodProtection/ProgramStandards/default.htm>
2. NACCHO. (2017). 2016 National Profile of Local Health Departments. Washington, DC: NACCHO. Retrieved September 6, 2017, from <http://nacchoprofilestudy.org/chapter-7/>

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The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to be a leader, partner, catalyst, and voice for local health departments.

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