

# A Local Health Department's Journey through the Mentorship Program for the Retail Program Standards

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Being in the trenches with the mentee helps the mentors refocus their own efforts on the standards and sheds new light on their existing program.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) created the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (Retail Program Standards) to reinforce proper sanitation and reduce factors associated with the occurrence of foodborne diseases. By adopting these standards, local health departments (LHDs) can prevent foodborne illnesses and protect the health of their communities.

NACCHO's Mentorship Program for the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards provides opportunities for LHD staff to learn about the Retail Program Standards through active participation and training; share experiences; develop tools and resources; and support the use of the Retail Program Standards nationwide. Through the program, LHDs seeking assistance in adopting the Retail Program Standards are matched with seasoned LHD mentors that help build and sustain the mentee LHDs' capacity to adopt the standards.

## The First Step

The Lake County (OH) General Health District (LCGHD) was introduced to the Retail Program Standards in 2010 at the Conference for Food Protection. NACCHO's call for applications for the Retail Program Standards mentorship program first caught the eye of the Environmental Health Director in 2012 and LCGHD was accepted into the program's second Cohort one year later.

LCGHD's mentor was St. Louis County (MO) Department of Public Health, which supported LCGHD as it attempted the self-assessment component of the Retail Program Standards. The task of the self-assessment fell to the senior food safety sanitarians because half of the staff were sanitarians-in-training with less than two years of experience. After their initial review of the nine standards, the LCGHD team assumed that completing the self-assessment would not be difficult because of the department's strong food program. However, after the first conference call with their mentors in St. Louis County, their hopes of a quick and easy self-assessment were dashed.

The team's first step in approaching the mountain of work ahead was to divide and conquer. The senior sanitarians took ownership of each standard, becoming the standards' lead. They created a four-inch binder for each standard, in addition to electronic files. They decided that the best approach was to collect the documents and organize them as the food safety sanitarians tackled each standard. The team exchanged multiple e-mails and participated in phone conference calls with their mentors throughout this process.

## Face-to-Face Collaboration

With a stack of binders in tow and an eye on their budget, the three senior food safety sanitarians drove nearly 12 hours for an in-person site visit with their mentor LHD. The experience was eye-opening for the LCGHD staff, truly exposing them to the magnitude of the Standards process and the extent of its potential to improve a food

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safety program. During the site visit, St. Louis County staff thoroughly reviewed all nine standards, helping LCGHD identify the strengths and weaknesses of their food program. Throughout their interactions, LCGHD staff learned a crucial lesson from St. Louis County: The standards are not completed in a year or two; they are part of a continual process of advancing an organization's food program.

The in-person meeting also allowed LCGHD and the St. Louis County Department of Public Health to exchange resources, such as foodborne illness policies, which helped guide LCGHD's approach for Standard 5. As a group, mentor and mentee staff built rapport with one another and shared ideas in a relaxed, comfortable setting. St. Louis County scheduled the in-person visit in conjunction with its Restaurant Commission Meeting. Being present at this meeting helped lay the foundation for LCGHD to form its own Food Safety Task Force Annual Meeting, which was the component it needed to meet Standard 7. Serving as mentors for LCGHD during the site visit also re-energized St. Louis County to recommit to the standards.

LCGHD received additional in-person support at a two-day NACCHO-led conference for participants in the mentorship program in Washington, DC. The conference convened cohort members, NACCHO staff, and FDA representatives and provided a platform to share experiences and establish common ground. LCGHD staff also served as NACCHO's outreach representatives at the National Environmental Health Association's Annual Educational Conference in Las Vegas and the FDA Central Regional Conference in Lansing, MI.

### A New Path Forward

In August, 2014, LCGHD experienced a misfortunate event: its office building caught on fire. Most of the environmental health division was destroyed. However, some of the first things the food sanitarians recovered were the standards binders, allowing them to rebuild their

food program from the ashes. At the time of the fire, LCGHD was in the midst of applying for accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board. LCGHD found the FDA Crosswalk on Public Health Accreditation and Voluntary National Retail Program Standards documents provided a connection between the two. This crosswalk helped the health department by identifying many resources that are useful in addressing both accreditation and the standards program.

Unfortunately, Ohio has legislative road blocks that prevent LHDs from accomplishing several standards. In response, LCGHD has tried to bolster local interest in NACCHO's mentorship program with the hope that a stronger group of advocates for the Retail Program Standards will be able to push for change at the state level. To garnish interest in the standards, LCGHD began a regional roundtable meeting for LHDs to discuss the standards. LCGHD also acted as a verification auditor for several LHDs that are in the process of adopting the standards.

In 2015, LCGHD took on a new role in the mentorship program by serving as a mentor to Arlington (MA) Health Department in Cohort 4. Arlington is a very small health department with limited resources. Due to their limited capacity, Arlington Health Department staff were especially grateful to take part in the mentorship program and for LCGHD's assistance with the completion of their Standard 6 self-assessment. Being in the trenches with the mentee helps the mentors refocus their own efforts on the standards and sheds new light on their existing program.

LCGHD applied and was selected to be a mentor again in 2016 for Ottawa County (MI) Department of Public Health and Summit County (OH) Public Health as a part of Cohort 5. Its mentorship support consisted of conference calls, e-mails, and document-sharing. The proximity to Summit County allowed for several in-person visits. LCGHD also travelled to Ottawa County Department of Public Health, gaining useful insight about Ottawa's enforcement policy.

### Lessons Learned

One key lesson LCGHD staff learned through their mentorship program experience is the importance of maintaining standards documentation in both print and electronic formats. Collecting documents in binders may seem "old school" and unnecessary; however, after the fire that LCGHD endured, which restricted computer access, the binders became essential. Additionally, Ottawa County stated that they found policies and procedures easier to review and discuss when on paper instead of on a computer screen. With its experience completing verification audits and being audited, LCGHD has found that having all resources and documents on paper allows the auditor to quickly and successfully provide an audit.

LCGHD staff also learned the importance of being fully prepared for the in-person site visit. Face-to-face visits are more productive when both mentee and mentor come to the table with all of their document resources organized and ready.

After four years of involvement in the standards, LCGHD is still learning and gathering knowledge from others, especially from entities outside of Ohio. In-person meetings have been the key to collaboration for the mentorship program. Finally, LCGHD staff emphatically call on peer LHDs to step out of their comfort zone and dive into the Standards with their eyes and ears open and the desire to learn. The first step they recommend is joining the mentorship program as it provides an amazing support network of professionals for guidance and encouragement.

*For more information about NACCHO's Mentorship Program for the Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards, visit <http://www.naccho.org/programs/environmental-health/hazards/food-safety/mentorship>.*