



## Demonstrated Impact from a Regional Approach to Food Safety Education

**Introduction:** North Central Region (NCR) Extension educators have banded together to develop and deliver high-impact food safety programs to consumers across the region. Formed in 2016 with support from state Extension Family and Consumer Science Program Directors from the region, the NCR Food Safety team developed and delivered food safety education evaluation tools based on home food preservation topics in 2017 and 2018 and expanded to include produce safety for food pantries in 2018 and 2019.

**Background:** NCR Extension educators met face-to-face outside Chicago, IL in March and again in December 2016 and formed a regional food safety education team. Ms. Kadi Row (Evaluation Specialist, University of Wisconsin-Extension) supported the team during 2017.

The team meets monthly via Zoom (8:30-10:00; 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday of the month) with administrative support for monthly meetings from Michigan State University (2016-2019) and Iowa State University (2018-current). Website support is provided by North Dakota State University: <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/ncrfoodsafety>

Monthly meetings focus on design and delivery of impactful food safety education programs, resource sharing, and development of a strong regional network that supports food safety education and professional development.

Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, North Dakota, and Wisconsin were early food safety team leaders. Subsequently, Iowa, Kansas, and South Dakota joined as active team members.

The team includes food safety/food and nutrition specialists and county-based extension educators, and is supported by content specialists, researchers, and national experts who work with the team as projects require.

**Regional impact in home food preservation:** The NCR regional food safety Extension team focused on evaluation of home food preservation education in 2017 and 2018. A post-pre end-of-session evaluation of home food preservation training was developed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and adopted by regional food safety team members; an online data-collection tool was developed by North Dakota State University. A 3 to 6-month post-training evaluation was also developed and delivered.

Five NCR states (Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri and North Dakota) participated in the initial year of this effort. While home food preservation workshops are time and resource intensive, they can serve as effective settings for participants to achieve significant knowledge gains. In 2017, a total of 1,620 participants enrolled in home food preservation classes across the region that used the common end-of-session evaluation tool. Almost all (96%) of workshop participants reported that they learned information in the program that was new to them. Most participants significantly increased confidence in food preservation abilities, their understanding of the importance of following research-tested recipes, and their ability to identify and share trustworthy sources of information with others.

A subset of participants (n=201) responded to a 3-to 6-month post-workshop follow-up online evaluation. Most (67%) had changed their food preservation practices, 93.5% indicated they always practice safe home food preservation practices, 94.5% had shared Extension resources with others, and 96% indicated greater confidence in their ability to preserve food safely as a result of Extension home food preservation training.

In 2018, the team revised the end-of-session evaluation tool based on educator feedback in 2017. In 2018, data collection expanded to include South Dakota. From 2017-2018, a total of 3,381 participants used a common end-of-session tool to evaluate their response to Extension-delivered home food preservation training. Almost all (99%) of workshop participants in 2018 would recommend the educational program in which they participated to others. As a result of participation in an Extension home food preservation program, nearly 80% planned to use the resources provided, 74% planned to preserve food more often at home, 66% planned to share what they learned with other people, and 59% planned to check if the food preservation resources they used at home were -up-to-date.

In 2019, **the original team received the national multistate collaboration award from the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (NEAFCS) for regional food preservation programming.** The team gave three presentations about the programming at the NEAFCS annual conference in Hershey, PA, and presented project outcomes at the National Food Safety Education conference in Orlando, FL. A manuscript describing the regional approach to program evaluation has been accepted for publication (2020) in the national journal for NEAFCS.

**Regional impact in produce safety for food pantries:** The national network *Feeding America* estimated more than 4 million people in the upper Midwest were food insecure in 2014. Food pantries serve as an important emergency food source, with fresh produce being a sought-after item for food pantry guests. While the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* encourage consumption of fruits and vegetables, fresh produce has increasingly been linked to foodborne illness outbreaks.

To meet the need for food safety education, Extension educators in the NCR developed and delivered food safety training for gardeners and food pantry staff to help ensure that safe, healthy produce is distributed to food pantry guests. In 2017, Extension educators with Michigan State University and the University of Wisconsin developed and piloted materials to train gardeners and food pantry staff in food safety through ***The Safe Produce for Food Pantries Project*** (<https://safeproduce4foodpantries.org>). Gardeners donating fresh produce learned to ***Make Your Donation Count*** and food pantry staff and volunteers learned to ***Keep Produce Fresh and Healthy***. In 2018, Extension educators in Iowa and North Dakota expanded project outreach.

The end-of-session evaluation (n=167) showed the training:

- increased understanding of why safe produce is important for food pantry guests (92%)
- increased understanding of steps to ensure safe produce is available to food pantry guests (94%)
- increased understanding of the importance of safe produce donations (100%) or a clean and sanitary food pantry environment (92%)

Overall the training was rated as 'good' to 'excellent' across all participants. The University of Wisconsin-Madison hosts project materials and supports on-going training and evaluation efforts.

**Next steps: NCR Extension educators have demonstrated significant impact through a regional approach to focused food safety education.** Future goals include:

- Build a funding base to support program development and maintenance
- Increase participation across the region in order to further increase project impact
- Better inform stakeholders of programming impact, including state program leaders and national program directors
- Encourage on-going development of food safety educational projects across the region
- Enhance existing food safety educational efforts with a focus on new audiences and new methods of instruction
- Maintain a strong network of resource sharing and professional development amongst food safety educators in the NCR