

# Evidence-Based Approaches to Promoting Health Equity in Retail Food Safety

Foodborne illness is costly, preventable, and all too common. Public health agencies are responsible for food safety and reducing foodborne illness by educating and inspecting retail food establishments. [Several studies](#) have found that independent ethnic restaurants—those that serve food originating from a culture or heritage of certain ethnic groups—had more violations and, as a result, were inspected more frequently than the average. Some of these violations may be related to a misunderstanding of the food code and/or language barriers.

Currently, more than one in four [food service employees](#) speaks a language other than English at home and 22% of employees have less than a high school diploma. It is crucial that food safety resources and messaging provided by public health agencies be made available to reflect varying languages and literacy proficiencies to ensure accessibility and comprehensibility for all.

[Achieving health equity](#), in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health, requires health agencies to evaluate their approaches to food safety so all food establishments can meet retail food safety standards.

## Addressing Communication Barriers

Health agencies should be familiar with the diversity of languages and cultures in their jurisdiction so materials can be tailored to each community's differing needs. Providing food safety training courses, regulations, and other materials in languages spoken by local restaurant staff can reduce barriers so restaurant operators and workers who don't speak or read English fluently have access.

Having interpreters or multilingual inspectors can drastically improve communication between inspectors and restaurant staff. For health agencies without these resources, inspectors can utilize photos or translation services, such as Google Translate or language lines, to communicate effectively with restaurant operators. Demonstrating proper practices in person or through [videos](#) can also help communicate through observation.

With [more than half](#) of U.S. adults aged 16 to 74 years old reading below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level, food safety educational resources should be developed so that all populations have access to documents written at educational levels tailored for their community. Educational materials should meet [plain language](#) accessibility requirements, including limited text in the appropriate language and simple cultural appropriate imagery. Food safety inspectors can carry materials in multiple languages or have online resources they can share with the retail food facility, such as Washington's [Food Worker Manual](#) or FDA's [Educational Posters](#) that provide flyers on common food safety topics. Finally, newly developed resources should include the target audience in development and pilot testing to ensure they are achieving the desired impact.

## Designing Materials to Support Your Audience

Being familiar with cultural norms and communicating in a culturally sensitive way can enhance the delivery of food safety messaging. [One study](#) found that produce safety education materials developed for produce growers in the U.S. Virgin Islands were not seen as culturally appropriate. After redesigning the materials based on community feedback, the managers saw improvements in food safety knowledge and hygiene practices among produce growers. These results and similar studies suggest that educators should partner with impacted populations to evaluate the utility of potential interventions before implementation and ensure they are interpreted as intended.

In addition to culturally appropriate food safety education materials, agencies can ensure that they meet the practical needs of the retail environment. For example, materials targeted for mobile facilities (i.e., food trucks) may need to be durable and waterproof to withstand operation and transportation.

## Ensuring Equitable Enforcement at Your Health Agency

Health agencies can incorporate concepts such as equitable enforcement and health equity into their staff's annual training curriculum. Equitable enforcement promotes compliance with law and policy that considers and minimizes harm to people affected by health inequities. ChangeLab Solutions' guide on [Equitable Enforcement to Achieve Health Equity](#) educates policymakers, advocates, and enforcement officials on best practices in the design and development of enforcement provisions to avoid inequitable impacts and promote community health.

A [study](#) from Michigan State University found that food safety professionals throughout the United States, especially at the local level, encountered a variety of ethnic food establishments and ethnic foods for which they lacked relevant food safety training. The smartphone application, [Cultural Food Safety App](#), offers searchable information on food safety issues and control measures associated with specific culturally based foods. This app can help regulators better understand cultural foods and their production to ensure foods are being safely prepared and be more familiar with what to look for when conducting inspections.

Lastly, health agencies can incorporate a [Health in All Policies](#) framework into their food safety practices through ASTHO's [Food Safety Guides](#). ASTHO strongly supports health agencies in promoting a diverse and culturally competent food safety workforce.

By assessing jurisdiction demographics, addressing communication barriers, tailoring resources to fit the audience, and building a culturally competent workforce, health agencies can improve equity in their jurisdiction's food safety programs.

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