Making healthy, safe food accessible for all Minnesotans
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WHAT IS THE HEALTHY FOOD, SAFE FOOD ACTION GUIDE?

This guide is a resource for organizations and agencies working to make sure all Minnesotans have reliable access to healthy, safe food by:

- Addressing the tension between making healthy food more available and ensuring safe food
- Making it easier for organizations to provide healthy foods, while maintaining food safety
- Providing relevant resources, examples, guidance, and actionable steps

The contents of this guide came from a broad engagement process, including many people and organizations involved in healthy eating, food safety, and disease prevention. They identified action steps to address how best to increase healthy food access, while maintaining food safety.

NEED HELP?

Order the Healthy Food, Safe Food Toolkit at z.umn.edu/hfsf for more resources to create access to healthy, safe food in your community or organization.
Increasing reliable access to safe, affordable, healthy food for all Minnesotans is an important strategy that will leave a legacy of health and prosperity for our state. Yet access to healthy food—such as fruits, vegetables, meats, and whole grains—is particularly challenging for some Minnesotans, including those:

• With limited resources, disabilities, and health issues
• Living in remote, rural areas
• Experiencing structural racism and other institutional barriers such as lack of public transit

In fact, numerous systemic barriers experienced by these Minnesotans result in measurable health disparities that can be directly linked to healthy food access.

Safe food matters too. We are all vulnerable to foodborne illnesses, especially those facing the greatest health disparities or who are particularly vulnerable due to age or immunodeficiencies. Food safety practices and associated regulations are crucial means to ensure that our food supply keeps us healthy yet can also unintentionally present barriers to healthy food access.

Organizations, such as child care providers, food shelves, out of school programs, and farmers’ markets are working hard to prepare food from scratch, use more complex recipes, serve fresher foods, teach cooking skills, sample foods, and demonstrate how to prepare healthy dishes. The food safety system can hinder these efforts, as well as those of growers, distributors, and retailers who provide these foods.

Times have changed. Consumers want convenient, affordable, healthy food. Our current food safety system is complex—not well-suited to these trends. We can take action together to ensure our food supply is safe, healthy, and meets consumer’s preferences.
HOW DOES THE FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM WORK IN MINNESOTA?

As many begin working together between the food safety and healthy food access arenas, it’s helpful to understand Minnesota’s food safety system. Here are all the elements of our state’s regulatory system and the people who make our food safe and healthy.

FEDERAL AGENCIES

Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

The federal government strives to promote the application of science-based food safety principles to minimize the incidence of foodborne illness and assist regulatory agencies through model food law, guidance, training, program evaluation, and technical assistance. FDA and USDA also each regulate certain types of facilities and have inspectors throughout Minnesota. For example, FDA inspectors inspect some of the food processing plants that sell products across state lines and USDA inspectors work in some of Minnesota’s meat processing facilities.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Can act as MDH/MDA proxy to conduct licensing and inspections for local restaurants and retailers and enforce local food safety laws, oftentimes carried out by city or county health departments. At the time of publication, MDH has 35 counties and 9 cities as delegates and MDA has delegated food retail safety enforcement to 5 cities and 2 counties. Minnesota is almost evenly divided between local agency and state inspectors. Regardless of agency, inspectors most often live in or near the communities they serve. Federal, state and local agencies collaborate to protect the food supply.

MN DEPT OF AGRICULTURE

Enforces state standards for food quality, condition, labeling, advertising, and sanitation of premises, equipment, and vehicles used in food and beverage processing, storage, distribution and sales. Conducts food safety audits of farms. Investigates complaints and foodborne illness outbreaks. Licenses and inspects food manufacturers, distributors, and retailers. Educates on safe food-handling practices and engages stakeholders for a safe food supply.

LAW MAKERS

Create federal, state, & local food safety laws; fund food safety agencies.

TRIBAL NATIONS

Some are starting to create comprehensive tribal food codes; Indian Health Services or state agencies may work with tribes on tribal food safety and outbreaks.

FARM TO TABLE PROVIDER

Offers healthy, safe food where people work, learn, and play, such as child care centers, schools, food shelves, retailers, and restaurants.

INSPECTOR

Ensures clean, safe air, food, and water; responds to outbreaks and emergencies; educates on environmental health.

NUTRITION EDUCATOR

Helps create healthy communities and teaches food skills to Minnesotans with limited resources.

TRIBAL AND LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTITIONER

Makes healthy, safe food accessible for everyone, through supportive policies and environments.
WHAT IS THE HEALTHY FOOD, SAFE FOOD PROJECT?

The Healthy Food, Safe Food Project partners engaged over 100 people working at the intersection of healthy eating, food safety, and disease prevention.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

HOW DO I HELP PRODUCE GROWERS, CHILD CARE PROVIDERS, FOOD SHELVES, SCHOOLS, FOOD BUSINESSES, AND OTHERS PROVIDE HEALTHY, SAFE FOOD TO THE PEOPLE THEY SERVE?

Local public health (SHIP) and Extension (SNAP-Ed) work in each county across Minnesota to create healthier food environments in communities. Likewise, food safety is handled locally by a state, county, or city inspector. SHIP, SNAP-Ed, and Food Safety make a great team for increasing the availability of healthy, safe food. If you are one of these staff, reach out to the other two. If you work in another capacity, reach out to all three to collaborate.

HEALTHY FOOD, SAFE FOOD PROJECT PARTICIPANTS EXPLORED THIS QUESTION:

“How can we take action together to ensure our food safety system supports greater access to healthy foods for all Minnesotans?”

WHO CAN ASSIST FOOD BUSINESSES AND RESTAURANTS WITH FOOD SAFETY ISSUES?

Start with your local inspector. There may be several people and agencies involved, and the inspector can help guide you through the process. The inspector will want to know what the business makes, who the customer base is, and where products are made and sold. Menu and product details are the most critical pieces of information to provide the inspector.

VISIT health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/food/license/locals.pdf

WHO CAN I WORK WITH IF I’M TRYING TO INCREASE ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS AND ENSURE FOOD SAFETY?

Contact your local food inspector and use the Resources page in this guide.

HOW DO I ADDRESS A REGULATORY ISSUE THAT MY INSPECTOR AND I CAN’T RESOLVE?

This guide’s Resources page provides a contact for each agency. Consult the list and inquire about ways to help achieve a solution.

WHO CAN I WORK WITH IF I’M TRYING TO INCREASE ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS AND ENSURE FOOD SAFETY?

College students
Corrections
Educators
Elected and appointed officials
Farmers, growers and ranchers
Financial Institutions
Food businesses and providers
Food and farm-related organizations that serve diverse audiences
Funders
Healthcare and public health professionals
Healthy food advocates
Institutional foodservice decision-makers
People working on food access issues
Recent immigrants
Researchers in agriculture, food, and health
Social justice advocates
Tribal nations
Workers in food- and farm-related jobs

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

- College students
- Corrections
- Educators
- Elected and appointed officials
- Farmers, growers and ranchers
- Financial Institutions
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- Recent immigrants
- Researchers in agriculture, food, and health
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THE BALANCING ACT

People can be free of diet-related diseases and foodborne illnesses if we maintain a nourishing, safe food supply. While the current food safety system minimizes foodborne illnesses, it is sometimes at odds with growing, making, selling, and serving fresh, healthy options in many settings. Likewise, the desire to enact policy and systems changes that increase availability of fresh, healthy foods can increase the risk of foodborne illnesses in these places. The food safety system is complex; changing it isn’t easy. If we work together as partners, we can go a long way in making the shifts we need.

WHERE WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION

- Farm to Cafeteria
- Salad Bars
- Fresh foods served in educational, work, healthcare, eldercare, and other institutional settings
- Sampling and food shelves
- Sampling foods at farmers markets
- New, innovative healthy food business models such as mobile groceries
HEALTHY FOOD, SAFE FOOD

GOAL: FOSTER AN EFFECTIVE, BENEFICIAL FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM THAT KEEPS PEOPLE HEALTHY

CHALLENGES

COMPLIANCE: The food safety system emphasizes safety over healthy foods and compliance over education and support.

- Keep shifting food safety mindset from enforcement to also encompass support and education.
- Move community health mindset toward support, partnership, and integration of food safety into healthy food access efforts.

RULES: Food safety rules are often complicated, confusing, misperceived, or misinterpreted.

- Simplify Minnesota’s food safety system and rules, making it easier to navigate and understand.
- Ensure consistency in interpretation of rules by inspectors.
- Clarify and provide widespread, consistent communication on approved food sources.

FEAR: Food businesses and providers fear the licensing, inspection, and regulatory processes.

- Decrease fear and reduce risk by developing collaborations among food business owners, public health professionals, food industry partners, regulators, and university staff.
- Provide food safety education, especially to those who have the least access to food safety resources.

ACTIONS

- Streamline, clarify, and simplify rules, regulations, policies, and enforcement in support of healthy, safe food sampling.
- Assess and modify rules, regulations, and procedures from a risk/benefit standpoint to support child care providers in offering healthy, safe foods to children.
- Collaborate on making safe, healthier foods available in vending machines, concession stands, school celebrations, and out-of-school activities.
- Support new food businesses in the licensing process by forecasting business trends and establish processes to reduce time required for innovative and new business types to become operational.

INCREASING HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

FOOD SKILLS: Food safety regulations can make it difficult to offer educational food sampling, cooking demonstrations, and food skills instruction.

- Streamline, clarify, and simplify rules, regulations, policies, and enforcement in support of healthy, safe food sampling.

CHILD CARE: Food safety rules, regulations, and policies limit child care providers from offering healthier foods.

- Assess and modify rules, regulations, and procedures from a risk/benefit standpoint to support child care providers in offering healthy, safe foods to children.
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- Support new food businesses in the licensing process by forecasting business trends and establish processes to reduce time required for innovative and new business types to become operational.

FOOD ENVIRONMENTS: Current regulations limit healthy food options for vending machines, concession stands, school birthday parties, and out-of-school activities.

- Assess and modify rules, regulations, and procedures from a risk/benefit standpoint to support child care providers in offering healthy, safe foods to children.

LICENSING: Existing license categories don’t allow for innovative business models aimed at increasing the availability of fresh, healthy, safe foods. Infrastructure is needed to support these models.

- Collaborate on making safe, healthier foods available in vending machines, concession stands, school celebrations, and out-of-school activities.
- Support new food businesses in the licensing process by forecasting business trends and establish processes to reduce time required for innovative and new business types to become operational.

PARTNERSHIP: Changing policies, systems, and environments to increase a community’s access to healthy, safe food can feel overwhelming to food safety, public health, Extension, and tribal health staff and their partners.

- Encourage leaders to support need to ensure healthy food is safe and accessible, through collaborations with relevant partners and supportive leadership.

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY: Historical trauma and limited access to safe, nutritious food have resulted in much higher rates of diet-related chronic disease in tribal nations.

- Support tribal sovereignty, such as developing a comprehensive, customizable model food and agriculture code for tribal nations. Assess food regulations for areas that hinder or limit tribal food sovereignty.

GOOD EXPAND ACCESS TO SAFE, HEALTHY FOOD IN PLACES WHERE PEOPLE LIVE, LEARN, WORK, AND PLAY

HEALTHY FOOD, SAFE FOOD
SUCCESS STORIES

When it comes to aligning the food safety system with increasing access to healthy food, real-life examples illustrate the complexities, challenges, and opportunities for change. These stories from Minnesota describe successful problem-solving to ensure healthy, safe food for community members and young children:

Providing access to fresh produce at farmers’ markets helps community members make healthy food choices. But consumers may be reluctant to buy certain foods if they don’t know how to prepare them. Until recently, vendors and educators at Minnesota farmers’ markets who wanted to bridge this knowledge gap by offering cooking demonstrations and samples were prevented from doing so by onerous licensing requirements and fees mandated by food safety laws.

“Vendors at the Morris Area Farmers Market participate in food safety education and training,” says Mary Jo Forbord, the Morris market’s board chair. “We provide hand washing stations for customer and vendor use, and follow food safety protocols when offering food samples. At the market, though, food safety goes well beyond preventing foodborne illness to our role in preventing nutrition-related diseases by providing fresh, delicious, locally grown fruits and vegetables to our community.”

In 2014, the Minnesota Farmers’ Market Association worked with representatives of the state’s health and agriculture departments as well as other stakeholders to pass legislation exempting farmers’ markets from these licensing provisions. Market vendors may now offer cooking demonstrations and free samples smaller than three ounces if they comply with food safety and equipment standards that apply to special event food stands.

“The old laws and rules regarding offering food samples at public events just did not fit today’s farmers’ markets. We wanted our vendors to be able to easily offer food samples and follow food safety measures,” noted Kathy Zeman, MFMA Operations Director.

“We collaborated with everyone involved, creating a solid solution to allow customers to safely sample food at farmers’ markets.”

Kathy Zeman
Operations Manager
Minnesota Farmers Market Association
Child care providers are uniquely positioned to instill healthy eating habits in young children. Examples of Minnesota programs designed to aid them in this mission include two programs launched with the help of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. The Farm to Childcare initiative supplies children at New Horizon Academy’s 62 centers across the state with healthy food from local farms. The Farm to Head Start project, administered by the Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties Head Start Program, connects participating children with fresh produce grown by members of the Hmong American Farmers Association at their nearby farm.

Yet many small or independent child care providers couldn’t afford to take advantage of farm-fresh produce even if it were made available to them. Current food safety regulations that require three-compartment sinks and a licensed food handler onsite to prepare fresh foods for meals and snacks served to children can make the cost of offering them prohibitive, and push providers towards less healthy pre-packaged options. Stakeholders can work together to develop regulations that ensure food safety and that child care providers of all sizes can offer healthy, safe options to young children.

“Making it possible for young children to eat more fresh, healthy food grown on nearby farms and teaching them gardening skills help form lifelong, healthy habits. However, we need to look at ways our food safety system can both keep kids safe and make it easier for child care providers of all types and sizes to be able to undertake these efforts.”

Joyce O’Meara
Early Childhood Specialist at the Minnesota Department of Health

SUCCESS STORIES

CHILD CARE

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RESOURCES AND TOOLS

Looking to learn more about food safety, regulations, or implementing action steps that help increase access to healthy, safe food? The below resources provide a wealth of information that can inform your work.

WANT A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF FOOD SAFETY SCIENCE, RULES, AND PRACTICES?

Agricultural Utilization Research Institute of Minnesota (AURI)
FoodSafety.gov
Food Safety Modernization Act
FIGHT BAC! Partnership for Food Safety Education: Supporting consumers to prevent food poisoning.
Minnesota Food Code Fact Sheets
MDA, MDH, Extension—Regulations, Policies, and Procedures for Foodservice
Produce Safety Alliance
Twin Cities Metro Advanced Practice Center
University of California Davis Food Safety
University of Minnesota Extension Food Safety Team

FIND YOUR FOOD INSPECTOR

Minnesota State and Local Food, Pools and Lodging

FIND INFORMATION BELOW ON MINNESOTA FOOD SAFETY AND THE FOOD SYSTEM FROM A POLICY PERSPECTIVE:

An Introduction to Land Use Policies
Metropolitan Food Systems Plan (Fargo-Moorhead Metropolitan area)
Minnesota Food Charter
Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA)
Local Food Advisory Committee
Public Health Law Center at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law, Healthy Eating and Food Safety Resources
Ohio State University John Glenn College of Public Affairs
Oregon Food Bank
Seeding the City: Land Use Policies
The Changemaker's Guide
University of Minnesota Extension Food Network Resources
University of Minnesota Food Policy Research Center

THE OFFICIAL WORD ON FOOD SAFETY FROM THE FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT:

Minnesota Department of Agriculture Food Safety
Minnesota Department of Health Food Safety
U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety
FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Food Safety

We can solve a lot by venturing outside our expertise and/or comfort zone. Conflict can turn into innovation; unexpected long-term collaboration can result. Many societal advances began with people who initially disagreed talking together. Contact your colleagues and work together to increase access to healthy, safe food!
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Other Key Partners
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For More Information
MDH Office of Statewide Health Improvement Initiatives
U of M Extension
Contact the Minnesota Food Charter

A shared roadmap developed by thousands of Minnesotans, the Minnesota Food Charter contains 99 proven policy and systems changes designed to increase reliable access to safe, affordable, healthy food for all the state’s residents. These strategies are implementable at all scales—from an individual organization to federal policy—and focus on healthy food environments, healthy food infrastructure, and healthy food skills. Implementing these strategies will increase the health and prosperity of our state, leaving a legacy of wellbeing for future generations. mnfoodcharter.com
USDA INFORMATION STATEMENTS

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, sex, religious creed, disability, age, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.), should contact the Agency (State or local) where they applied for benefits. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at 1-800-877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program complaint of discrimination, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form (AD-3027) found online at: www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html, and at any USDA office, or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call 1-866-632-9992.

Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by:

1. MAIL:
   U.S. Department of Agriculture
   Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
   1400 Independence Avenue, SW
   Washington, D.C. 20250-9410

2. FAX: 202-690-7442

3. EMAIL: program.intake@usda.gov

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

For any other information dealing with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) issues, persons should either contact the USDA SNAP Hotline Number at 1-800-221-5689, which is also in Spanish or call the MN Food HelpLine at 1-888-711-1151.

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