

# Responding to Consumers During a Pandemic: Food Safety and Program Delivery

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## Our Team, Our Study

In 2016, the North Central Food Safety Extension Network (NCFSEN) was formed to combine resources and share knowledge. (Other regional teams formed as well and have had success<sup>1</sup>.)

Currently in our fifth year of collaboration, we enjoy a dynamic membership within the land grant universities of the North Central region and have won an award for an evaluation tool we developed<sup>2</sup>.

Late last spring, during the initial stages of the pandemic, eleven of our team members were interviewed as part of a qualitative, IRB-approved study with the goal of understanding how a successful regional Extension team operates, the types of issues we field from consumers, and the sustainability of our team and its potential for growth.

All interviewees reported COVID-19 consumer concerns, including basic food safety hygiene, specific issues such as food hoarding, and a change of program delivery during pandemic conditions.

The information from this study shows how important it is to have an established, highly-functioning group of Extension professionals ready to handle a quickly shifting landscape during a public health crisis by delivering consumer-safe programming on safe food practices.

## Top Team Member Quotes from our Interview Study

“Consumers have all sorts of questions about the relationship between COVID-19 and food safety: what do they need to do to eat safely, what should they do at the grocery store, what should they do when they get the groceries home, and the whole gamut of questions like that.”

“I found it interesting with the whole pandemic thing that it just seems like it’s a whole new concept for people to wash their hands.”

“No more face to face.”

“Particularly during COVID-19 we get these requests from food pantries [for food preservation workshops].”

## Teamwork for Better Delivery in both Crisis and Calm (Takeaways)



20 heads are better than one...

The **top three advantages** of working in an Extension regional team (per interview results):

1. Sharing knowledge
2. Collaborative problem-solving
3. Mutual mentorship

Consumers ask...?  
Calming the pandemic panic



From growing gardens to growing teams

From our interview results we learned important steps to improve and sustain our team:

- Step 1: The 3 Cs—collaboration, consensus, contribute
- Step 2: Open the door to new members and revolving leadership
- Step 3: Planning—set in stone or rolling stone?

These were the most common **COVID-19 related question topics** our team received at the beginning of the pandemic (taken from interview results)

Produce washing or bleaching

Food provenance

Home butchery

Home gardening

Preserving home-grown

How safe is food

Handwashing

1. Bates, J. S., Benson, J. J., & Yelland, E. L. (2020). Forming a multistate network: From passion and coincidence to vision and sustainability. *Journal of Extension*, 58(1), 1-4.

2. Garden-Robinson, J., Nwadike, L., Ingham, B., Haraminac, E., Nichols, J., Mills-Gray, S., Rozhon, A., & Coleman S. M. (2019). Measuring the regional impact of Extension home food preservation using standardized evaluation tools. *Journal of the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 14, 45-59.