

There's no I in team, but one person can make a difference

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The Ohio Department of Health hired a FoodCORE program coordinator to improve foodborne investigation capacity through training student interns and local health departments, ensuring consistent staffing, and acting as a liaison with state and local health department staff. This position also provides surge capacity in the event of future public health emergencies.



The “What”

In order to increase capacity for rapid identification of foodborne outbreaks and implement control measures (such as removing contaminated foods from the food supply), Ohio joined the national FoodCORE project in 2010. FoodCORE promotes centralized interviews for individuals diagnosed with Salmonella, Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli*, and *Listeria* (SSL) and the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) currently provides this service on behalf of 92 participating local health jurisdictions (out of 111 total). Ohio-FoodCORE has historically had five student interns who attempt interviews of all individuals with SSL infections reported from local health departments participating in FoodCORE. This successfully reduced the burden on local health partners to conduct interviews, while also providing standardized collection of exposure data. However, the program experienced consistent turnover as students graduated (and became ineligible for continuing in the program) or moved on to other opportunities. This turnover frequently resulted in vacancies, significant investment for staff recruitment, and downtimes for training. Staff vacancies were most common during summer months, due to graduations, which coincided with peak illness burden time periods, and this had the potential to cause delays in interview attempts, impacting the ability to implement appropriate public health control measures.

In August 2022, using Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding, ODH hired their first FoodCORE program coordinator.



Having a position that offers **stability** to the team conducting patient interviews is vital to the success of the FoodCORE program in Ohio and **increases capacity to respond to other emerging infectious disease threats.**

The “So What”

This full-time position was created to improve continuity amid interviewer turnovers by conducting interviews and standardizing program training and processes. This position serves as a liaison between the student interviewer team and other ODH staff and local health jurisdictions. The program coordinator also provides interview training to local health jurisdiction staff as part of the regional foodborne outbreak training ODH staff conduct regularly.

The first FoodCORE program coordinator is a former student intern who is well versed in interview techniques and the Ohio public health infrastructure. To date, the program coordinator has served as a mentor and trainer for four student interns, including transitioning teams following summer graduations.

The “Now What”

Moving forward, having a position that offers stability to the team conducting patient interviews is vital to the success of the FoodCORE program in Ohio and increases capacity to respond to other emerging infectious disease threats. Many interview best practices are generally applicable; the FoodCORE program coordinator has already assisted with interviews associated with the East Palestine Train derailment and will be able to provide training and surge capacity in the event of

future public health emergencies. On a more routine basis, this position increases the dynamic flexibility of the FoodCORE team, particularly over the summer months. This position fills that role, providing continuity and the ability to transfer knowledge efficiently and effectively to new staff with minimum disruption to the ability of the interview team to conduct interviews, overall supporting the ability to rapidly identify outbreaks and protect individuals against future foodborne disease transmission.

Key contributors to this project include Brandi Taylor, Kara Tarter, Emily Ward, ODH FoodCORE interview team- Ohio Department of Health.