

# Virtual Inspections and Outreach in Response to COVID-19

## Ensuring Food Safety When You Can't Be There in Person

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### Introduction

In response to the impact of COVID-19 on our industry, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control's (DHEC) Food Team and the South Carolina Department of Agriculture's (SCDA) Food Safety Department developed innovative ways to continue to serve the community, while still ensuring public health protection. When state agency offices ceased in-person operation on March 19, 2020, DHEC and SCDA had to figure out how to protect public health and promote food safety functions without being able to go into an office or visit a facility. Virtual outreach and inspections were the answer.

### DHEC Virtual Preoperational Inspections and Food Safety Checks

In March 2020, a contractor needing to complete a preoperational inspection at a new facility asked a DHEC regional Team Lead if it would be possible to do a remote video inspection—they gave it a try and it worked! The DHEC restaurant inspection team developed and implemented a method for preoperational inspections to be conducted virtually for new restaurants looking to open:

- A Standard Operating Procedure was developed that includes how to set up and conduct the inspection.
- Disclaimer language was developed to be included on the inspection form, allowing for any item not observed during the virtual inspection to be addressed at later on-site inspections.
- An inspection email exchange protocol was developed to use in lieu of getting a signature on the inspection report.

Beginning April 14, 2020, DHEC developed an emergency procedure for conducting virtual "Food Safety Checks", based on the virtual permit inspection protocol. DHEC staff conducted these checks utilizing a variety of virtual platforms.

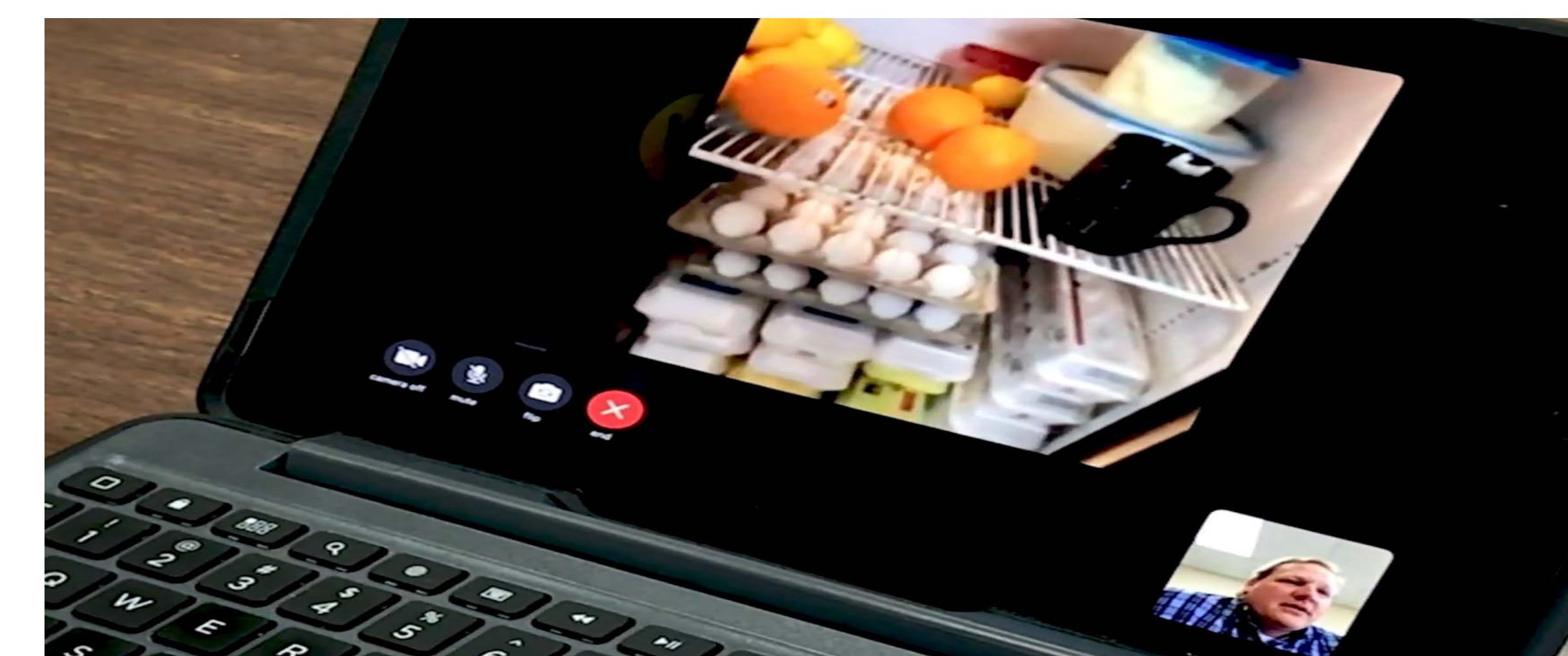
Virtual visits allowed DHEC to protect employees and operators' employees by providing social distancing while conducting these checks. The checks were non-graded and focused on educating operators on food service risk factors. Compliance assistance was offered on any observed risk factor violations during the virtual visit to correct any food safety concerns. This allowed DHEC to discuss current operational challenges and address any new processes that operators were using under COVID-19 related service restrictions. After a virtual check, the operator received a document that verified completion of a DHEC Food Safety Check and could be posted in-person on a door or online on social media, showing customers that measures were taken to provide safe food during the COVID-19 crisis. Checks were also posted on the DHEC Food Grades website. A list of facilities that have completed a virtual Food Safety Check was also made available on the DHEC Food Safety website.

A Food Safety Check form was also created in DHEC's electronic reporting system, separate and distinct from the standard regulatory inspection form. Questions on this new form were designed to collect information about how facilities were operating, focusing on major risk factors, and removing questions concerning Good Retail Practices. Questions were also "conditional" and allowed for DHEC inspectors to include comments.



### DHEC Limited Scope Retail Inspections

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to unfold, DHEC determined it was necessary to conduct more comprehensive inspections and began conducting "Limited Scope Inspections" on July 1<sup>st</sup>. These inspections were conducted on a pass/fail basis and focused on critical risk factors most likely to cause foodborne illness. As of November 3, a total of 17,937 virtual inspections have been conducted.



### SCDA Outreach Phone Calls and Virtual Inspections

Like their public health partner agency did with retail food establishments, SCDA adapted to help protect food safety while unable to perform in-person inspections of wholesale food manufacturing facilities. Shortly after state agency offices closed, SCDA sent out a blast email to all SC food manufacturers in the inspection inventory to collect information about their responses to the COVID-19 outbreak and received approximately 136 responses. In April 2020, SCDA Food Safety Officers began making Outreach Phone Calls to food firms in their assigned regions. Each Food Safety Officer was given an Excel spreadsheet of the firms in their region, organized by risk level (High, Medium, and Low). Inspectors were asked to prioritize contacting their High and Medium Risk firms first. Using an Outreach Phone Call Report Template, Food Safety Officers asked to speak to the person in charge at the firm and recorded their answers to 13 questions related to cleaning and sanitizing, COVID-19-related safety, and the impact of the virus on operations and production.

From April to July 2020, approximately 465 firms in 7 Regions across the state were contacted via Outreach Phone Calls. SCDA also developed the means to conduct Virtual Inspections using video conferencing services, including Apple Facetime and GoToMeeting. From June to July 2020, approximately 18 Virtual Inspections were performed. Virtual Inspections could be used as a part of complaint follow-up, new business registration, existing businesses updating their registrations, or routine inspections. Firms were required to send several documents prior to the inspection taking place, including a list of products that would be produced during the inspection and an image of the layout of the facility. The firm would "walk" the Food Safety Officer through the facility during the virtual inspection, who would record observations using the Virtual Inspections Form in SCDA's electronic inspection software. Disclaimer language was used when sending the firm a copy of the report, due to limitations caused by the inspections being virtual, and it was stated that a follow up in-person inspection may be deemed necessary, at the discretion of SCDA, when conditions are safe for in-person contact. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, in-person inspections resumed, with Food Safety Officers following best practices for inspections during a pandemic, including wearing PPE, practicing proper handwashing, and following social distancing guidelines.

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