

Continued Efforts in Kentucky Capacity Building and Food Safety Reporting System Utilization.

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Abstract

During the second year of the Kentucky Food Safety Reporting System’s (FSRS) existence, the Kentucky Rapid Response Team (RRT) has maintained its eclectic approach to increasing awareness levels in both the state’s population as well as in the national capacity framework. We’ve continued our outreach at the KY State Fair, hosted our first outreach booth at the KY Ag Roundup Conference, presented on the System during the Midwest is Best Regional RRT meeting, and partnered with Red7e, a third-party contractor, to analytically identify the most efficacious geographic locations to purchase billboard space to promote the System. During 2024, we also created a KY RRT Go-Kit to be utilized in case of an emergent foodborne crisis brought on by a natural disaster, massive foodborne outbreak, intentional tampering, or related event. We also used this opportunity to resupply inspection kits for field staff. Finally, the KY RRT was also involved in a foodborne outbreak that made international news when it was alleged that a child died after consuming strawberries though the cause of death was determined to be accidental fentanyl poisoning.

Introduction

System Outreach

KY RRT continued presenting at many conferences both within Kentucky and around the country to spread awareness for the Food Safety Reporting System. Meetings included our KY Food Protection Task Force meeting, the annual Midwest is Best Regional RRT Meeting, and the 2024 National Conference of State Legislators Summit. We also hosted an outreach booth at the KY State Fair for the second year where we distributed promotional materials for the System. Between this year and our first year we estimate having over 3,000 unique interactions with the public where materials were distributed, and education was provided to raise awareness of the System. We also hosted our first outreach booth at the 2024 KY Ag Roundup.

We also contracted with an advertising and marketing agency known as Red7e out of Louisville, Kentucky to bolster FSRS population engagement through social media advertisements, Google search optimization, website optimization, and a promotional billboard campaign.

Ramifications of the Strawberry Incident

KY RRT was also heavily involved in the death investigation of an 8-year-old child who died unexpectedly after consuming strawberries purchased from a school fundraiser. Samples were collected by law enforcement, given to the Food Safety Branch, then couriered to our Lab for testing. Preliminary investigation pointed to an allergic reaction. Autopsy results later revealed that the child died from a fentanyl overdose with both the stepfather and mother being charged. This response was especially important to us due to the gravity of a child’s death as well as the question it posed when there’s a possibility the suspected food could be adulterated with fentanyl or other illicit substances. These factors have played an important role in future SOP revisions especially when law enforcement entities are involved and will dictate future safety precautions when handling suspicious food samples. Images 5-8. depict the story’s evolution.

Go-Kit Creation and Inspector Kits

Utilizing an inventory list from the Missouri RRT, our mentor state, we finalized the list for the KY Go-Kit, purchased all necessary items, and assembled the kit. This go-kit is housed centrally in our Department’s main office and is ready for use in the event of an emergent foodborne crisis brought on by a natural disaster, foodborne outbreak, intentional tampering, or related event. Over the past four years Kentucky has suffered severe tornadoes in its western half and severe flooding in its eastern half. Because of this, we are hopeful that we will be better prepared to rapidly deploy field staff to impacted areas utilizing our newly created go-kit. We also purchased additional items for Manufacturing Inspector and Retail Consultant inventories.

Third-party Contracting Efforts

In 2024 we contracted with a third-party advertising and marketing company to increase utilization of our Reporting System. Based on their research, we decided that purchasing billboards in Bowling Green, Kentucky would be the most impactful which our recent increase in reports received from that area has shown. The below image displays one of the billboards. They also helped by increasing our search engine and backend website optimization where keywords while searching for the system were identified and elevated to improve our overall optimization score, making it easier for consumers to discover the system through online searches, and increase user interaction levels. This campaign specifically garnered 297,086 impressions with a total of 4,769 clicks. Finally, the campaign assisted our team by creating multiple, aesthetic social media advertisements which were displayed mainly through YouTube, Google, and Facebook.



Image 1. One of our multiple billboards placed in Bowling Green, KY.



Image 2. Two of our Retail Food Technical Consultants, Travis Patton and Karen Sanders, working the KY State Fair where they assist with inspecting food vendors throughout the full two weeks of the Fair protecting the health of all attendees.

Total FSRS Reports Received

Beginning with the system’s launch in October 2022 through November 2024 we had 1,350 reports which equated to approximately 3.4 reports per day. From July 2023 through May 2024, we received 653 retail food reports and 185 manufacturing food reports. Out of those reports, 516 reported having a foodborne illness while 321 did not. Out of the 653 retail food reports, 583 of them involved a restaurant, 26 involved a grocery/convenience store, and the remaining 58 involved a variety of other establishment types/events such as social gatherings or food trucks. Louisville Metro and Northern Kentucky also led our regions in the number of their reports which is to be expected as they’re our State’s two most populous areas. As we progress through our third year since the System’s launch, we hope to continue to build upon and incorporate the data we collect into our future efforts towards foodborne illness response.

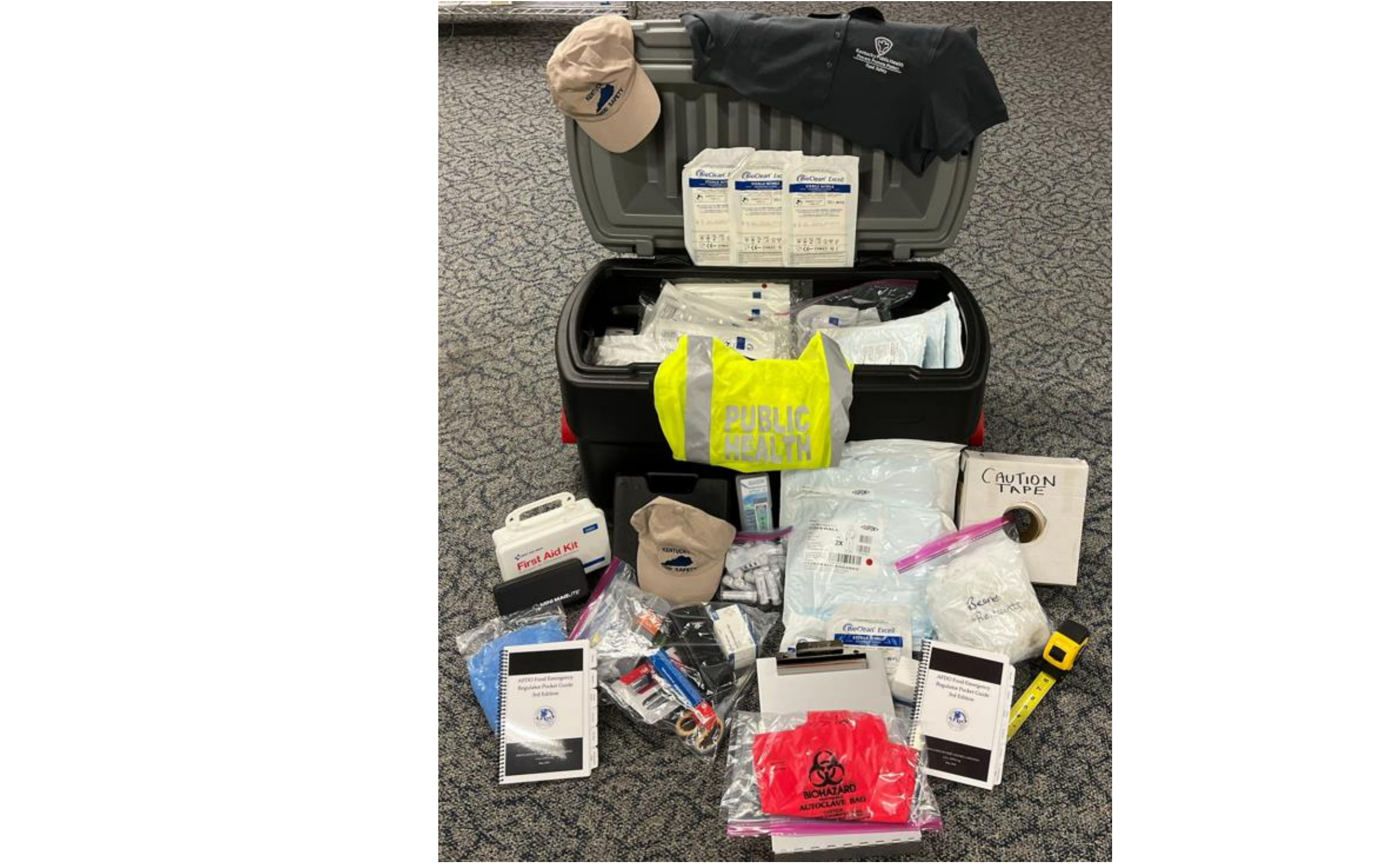


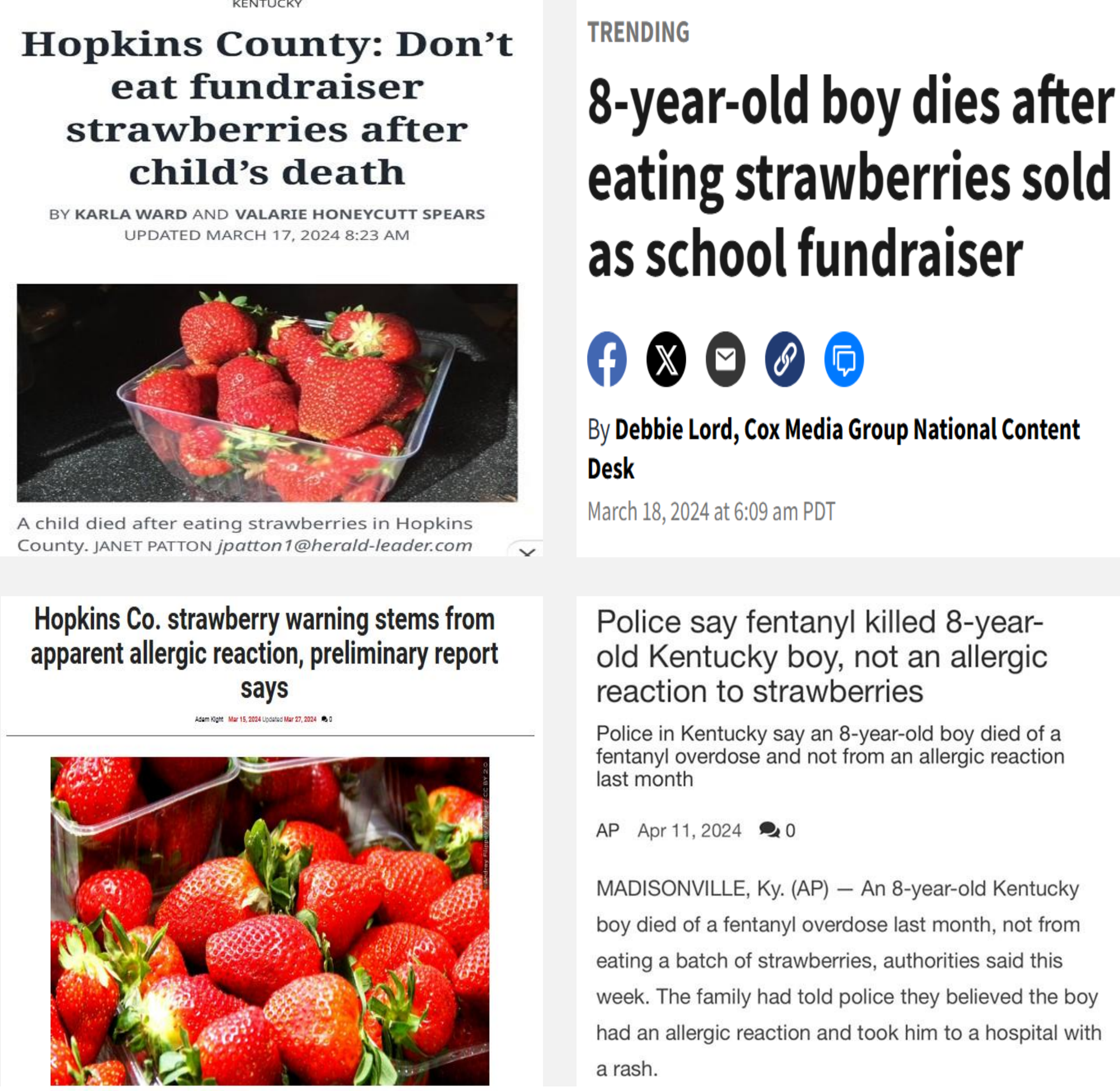
Image 3. Picture of the newly created KY Go-Kit housed in our basement storage in Frankfort, KY located centrally in the state and ready for rapid deployment.



Image 4. Jacob Hauser (RRT Grant Coordinator), Dan Anderson (RFRPS Coordinator), and Mark Reed (FSB Manager) posing for a picture at the KSU KY Ag Roundup.

Strawberry Incident Evolution

Images 5– 8. Snippets from several news sources showing the evolution from blaming strawberries to discovering it was a fentanyl overdose. (Lexington Herald, KIRO 7, 44News, ABC News).



Future Initiatives

Looking to the future of the FSRS and the KY RRT, we hope to maintain our current efforts in increasing awareness of the system while also expanding awareness to previously overlooked, marginalized groups. We’re currently exploring having the System translated to Spanish so we can begin a new advertising campaign targeting our state’s growing Hispanic population which often see underreported rates of foodborne illness due to language barriers. To accomplish this goal, we will work with our Cabinet’s marketing team and our internal Health Equity Office to create an action plan capable of meeting this population’s needs.

During 2025 we will also be hosting an Environmental Sampling, Swabbing, and Environmental Assessment Train-the Trainer course. This course will increase Kentucky’s capacity to respond to foodborne outbreaks by providing train-the-trainer opportunities to several different Departmental Branches and Local Health Department partners. The train-the-trainer aspect will also increase our sustainability and continuity between staff departures as we will be able to provide the same training internally without having to contract with a third party. Lastly, this will also serve to further teambuilding and foster collaboration between our program and our State Lab, Division of Epidemiology, Drug & Supplement Branch, Milk Safety Branch, and our valuable local health department partners.