



# **From Corporate to Corner Store:** Retail Food Safety Practices in Small Businesses and How They Compare with Large Brands

**Carrie Rigdon, Research Director &  
Deanna Copeland, Retail Food Safety Director**

AFDO AEC, June 8, 2026



# Learning Objectives

1. Describe the unique food safety challenges and characteristics of small retail food businesses compared to large brands.
2. Explain the roles of Food Safety Management Systems (FSMS) and Food Safety Culture (FSC) in small business settings.
3. Assess the impact of regulatory agencies and inspectors on food safety outcomes in small businesses.
4. Apply recommended strategies for inspectors and regulators to support and build capacity in small food businesses.



# 2025 Small Business Survey

COVER FEATURE



**From Corporate to Corner Store: Retail Food Safety Practices in Small Businesses and How They Compare with Large Brands**

Small businesses show positive signs of managerial engagement and understanding of food safety principles but face challenges in implementing formal Food Safety Management Systems

By Carrie E. Rigdon, Ph.D., Research Director, Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO); Sally L. Flowers, Ph.D., Scientific Affairs Director, AFDO; Deanna E. Copeland, Retail Food Safety Director, AFDO; and Steven Mandernach, J.D., Executive Director, AFDO

This study examines the implementation of Food Safety Management Systems (FSMSs) and food safety culture (FSC) among small retail food businesses in the U.S. and compares the findings to a prior national survey of large brand operators. Using a

Video credit: gonodenkoff/Ceasars Video/Getty Images Plus via Getty Images



Oct/Nov 2025  
Food Safety Magazine

# Survey Aims

- Assess current implementation and maturity levels of FSMS and food safety culture in small retail food businesses.
- Compare food safety knowledge, practices, and system maturity between small businesses and large brands.





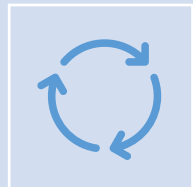
# Food Safety Management Systems & Food Safety Culture



**FSMSs** provide systematic, documented procedures and controls for identifying and managing hazards



the *How*



**Food Safety Culture** encompasses the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that prioritize food safety in daily operations



the *Why*

Food Safety Culture  
& FSMSs  
Reinforce One Another





# 2023 Large Brand Survey



## CURRENT STATES OF FOOD SAFETY CULTURE AND FOOD SAFETY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS

Image credit: 1shot Production/Creatas Video via Getty Images

In what ways is your brand either superior to or deficient from the behaviors revealed by your colleagues?

By **Mark S. Miklos, CP-FS, Advisory Partner, Active Food Safety**; **Elizabeth A. Nutt, M.P.H., Retail Food Safety Director, Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO)**; **Steven Mandernach, J.D., Executive Director, AFDO**; **Susan W. Arendt, Ph.D., Professor, Iowa State University**; and **Yang Xu, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Hawaii at Mānoa**

Although the U.S. food supply is considered one of the safest in the world, there are an estimated 9.4 million occurrences of foodborne illness each year.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, foodborne illness is estimated to cause more than 55,000 hospitalizations and more than 1,300 deaths



Apr/May 2023  
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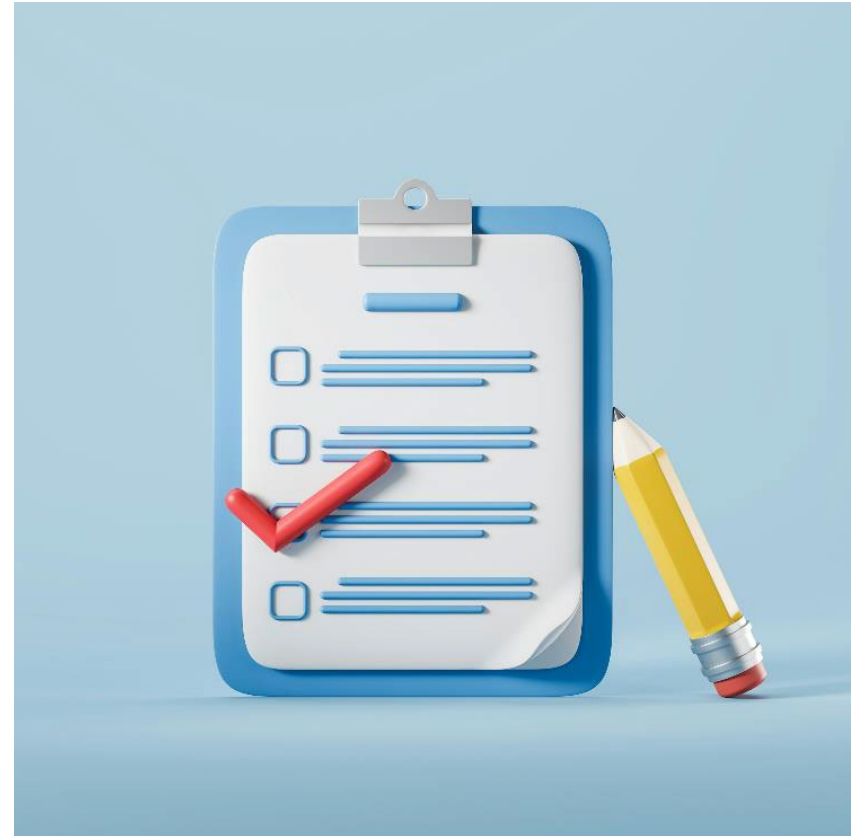
# Why Focus on Small Businesses?

- Retail is a critical control point for preventing foodborne illness
- 90% of U.S. restaurants have < 50 employees
- Small businesses ≠ scaled-down large brands

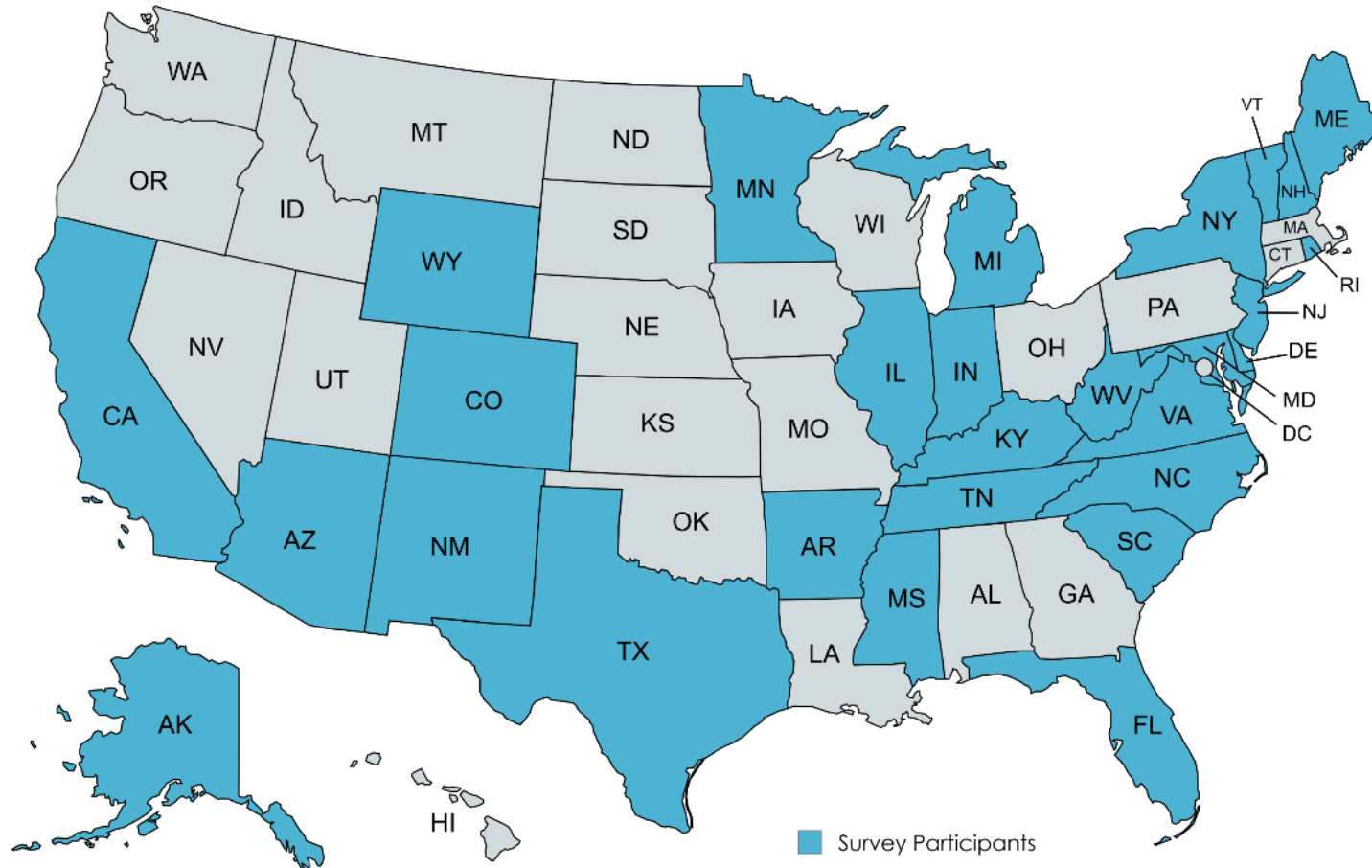


# Survey Design

- Modified large brand survey for small businesses
- Fewer questions, more plain language
- Participation incentive: entry to win one of 15 \$50 gift cards
- Direct email, state agency newsletters, local regulatory agencies
- Online survey open Oct. 30, 2024 through April 10, 2025



# Survey Responses

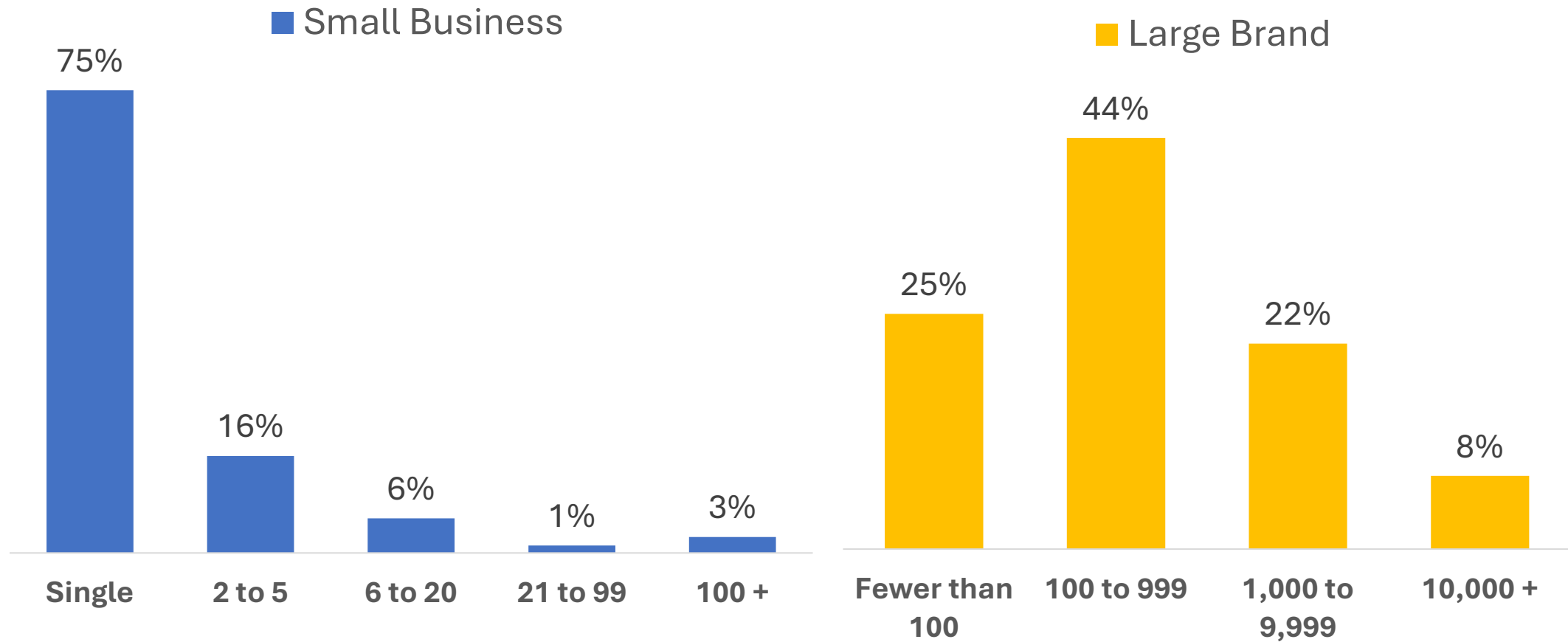


- 747 of 790 responses met “small business” definition
- Small = 50 or fewer FT employees
- 28 states



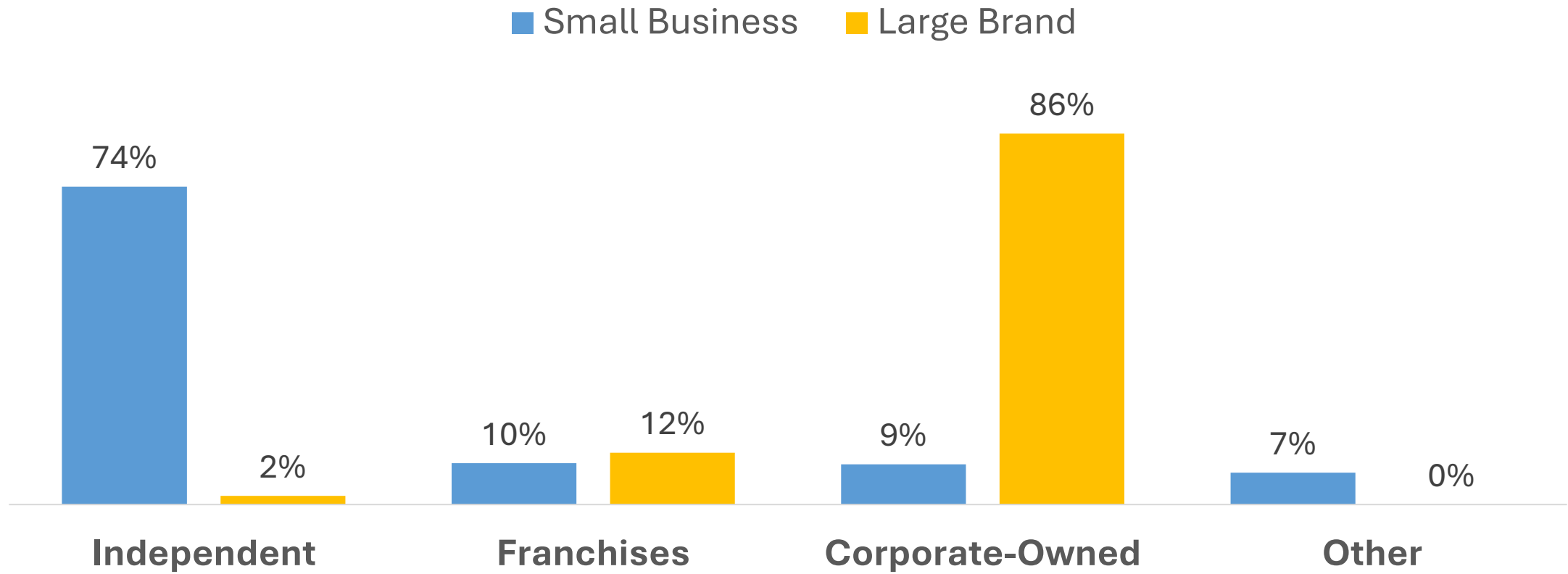


# Business Size in Number of Units



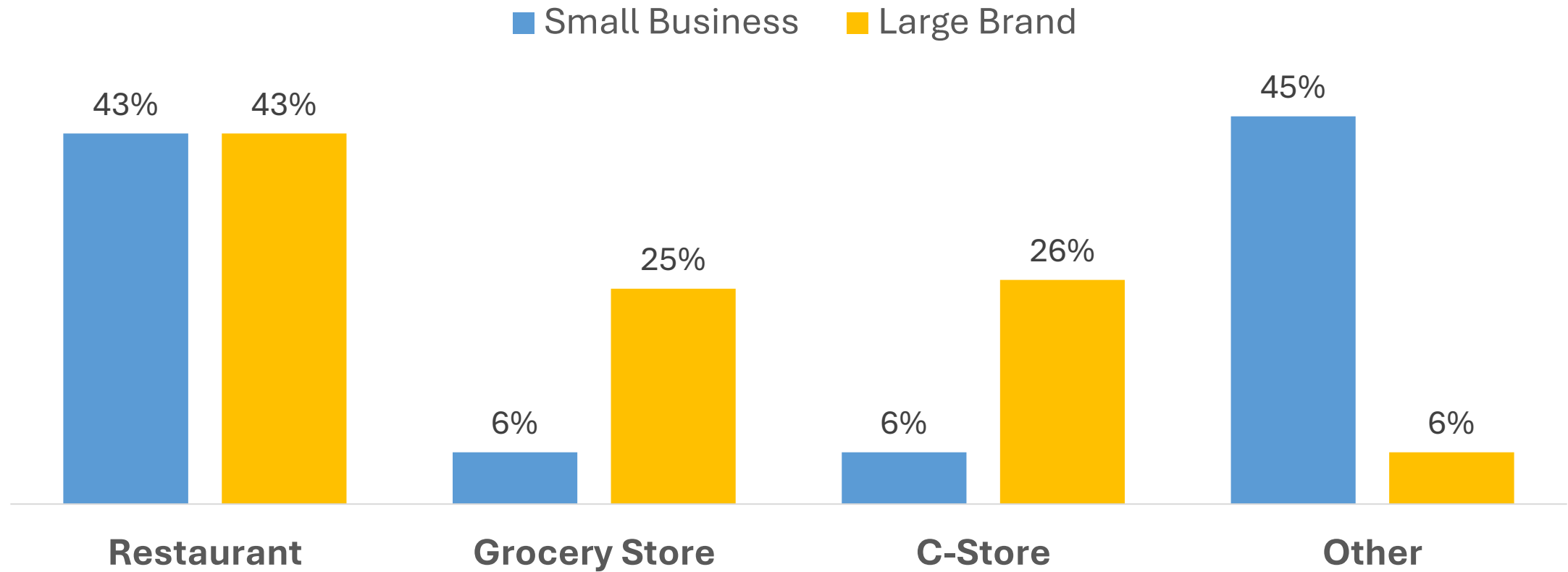


# Business Ownership





# Business Type



# Large “Other” Business Type Category





# Active Managerial Controls: What's Working

- Managers intervene when unsafe behavior is observed
  - 93% said they immediately intervene
- Managers model food safety behaviors
  - 68% role-model proper handwashing
- 69% said Manager conducts internal food safety checks
- Leadership commitment is present





# Management Practices

Management Practice	Small Businesses	Large Brands
Consistently model correct food safety behaviors for employees	68%	65%
Immediately intervene after observing unsafe food handling practices	93%	81%
Provide rewards or recognition to employees for good food safety practices	14%	46%



# Food Safety Management Systems

- Do small businesses have systems in place to ensure safe food?





# Food Safety Training

Food safety training provided to employees who handle food	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
Food Manager Certification training	427	57.9
Training by supervisor	427	57.9
In-house training	397	53.9
Food Handler Certificate class	381	51.7
Online training	173	23.5
Trained by employees other than supervisor	172	23.3
External training	62	8.4
None	8	1.1
Unsure	5	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>737</b>	

*Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*



# Food Safety Training

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92.8% of Large Brands had CFPM training

Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.



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45.8% of Large Brands require as a brand standard, regardless of regulatory requirements

Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.



# FSMS – Employee Practices

Employee practices that keep food safe	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
Check refrigeration and freezer temperatures	694	93.5
Date mark foods	652	87.9
Use safe thawing processes	572	77.1
Monitor cooking temperatures	543	73.2
Keep thermometers calibrated	534	72.0
Prep food in small batches	523	70.5
Monitor cooling process	428	57.7
Do line checks of hot and cold holding temperatures	426	57.4
Monitor reheating	396	53.4
Check delivery temperatures	330	44.5
Keep temperature logs	284	38.3
Use time labels when holding food at room temperature	229	30.9
We do not serve foods that need temperature control	101	13.6
Other	21	2.8
Unsure	4	0.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>742</b>	



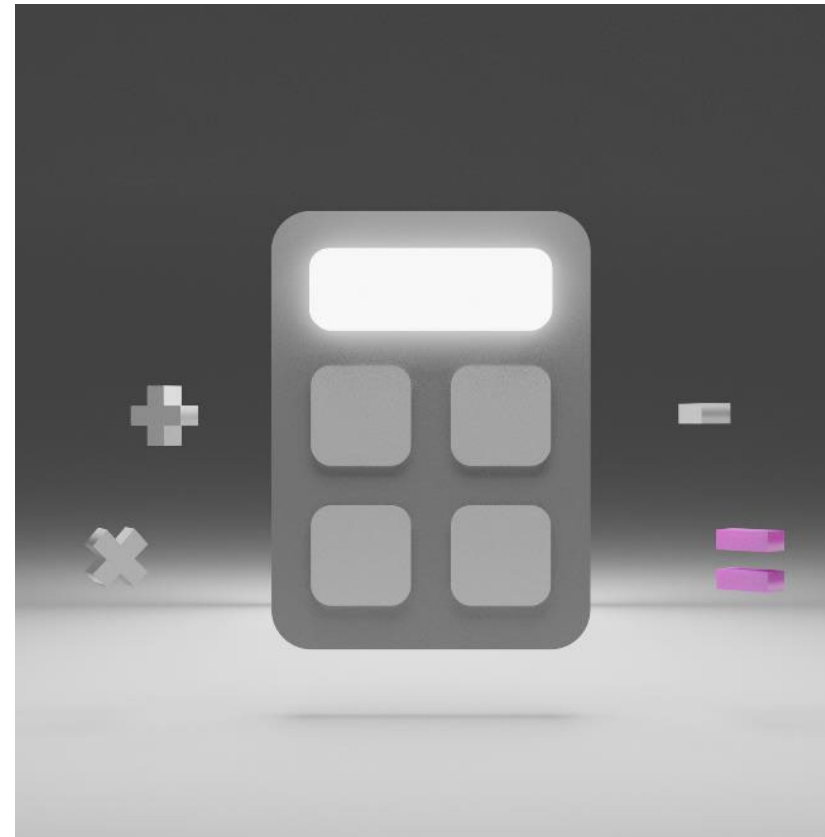
# FSMS – Policies and Procedures

Written food safety procedures or policies	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
Cleaning and Sanitization Procedure	595	81.1
Personal Hygiene Standards	574	78.2
Pest Management Program	363	49.5
Allergen Control Procedure	347	47.3
Emergency Response Plan	322	43.9
Preventive Maintenance Procedure	293	39.9
Supplier/Vendor Approval Program	173	23.6
Equipment Design Standards	149	20.3
Facility Design Standards	127	17.3
None of the above	42	5.7
Unsure	41	5.6
Other	9	1.2
	Not applicable	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>734</b>	



# FSMS Maturity – Composite Score Calculation

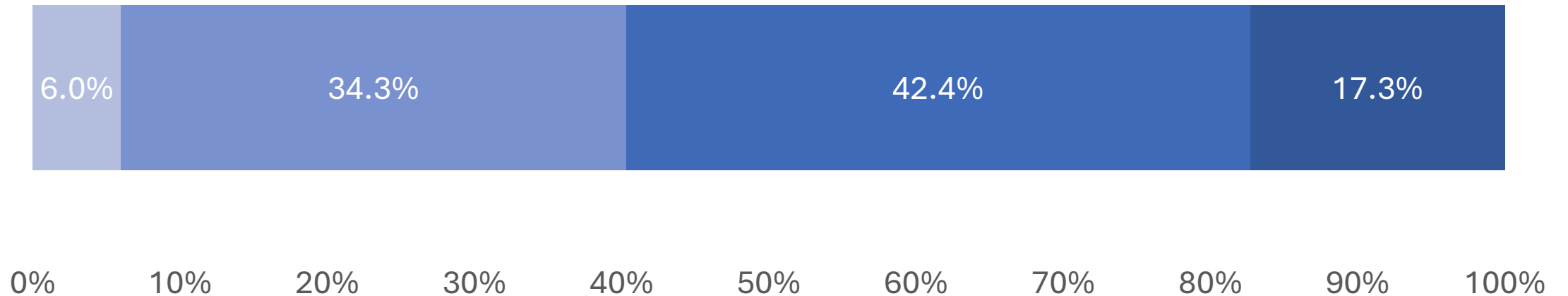
- Small business operators may be unfamiliar with Food Safety Management System terminology
- Survey included 15 of 37 questions designed to capture core FSMS principles
- The FSMS composite score reflected how well establishments implemented key food safety practices
- Weights were applied to reflect the strength of evidence demonstrated by the question or response related to a systematic, preventive food safety approach





# FSMS Weighted Score - Small Businesses

■ 0 to 40   ■ 41 to 80   ■ 81 to 120   ■ 121 to 161

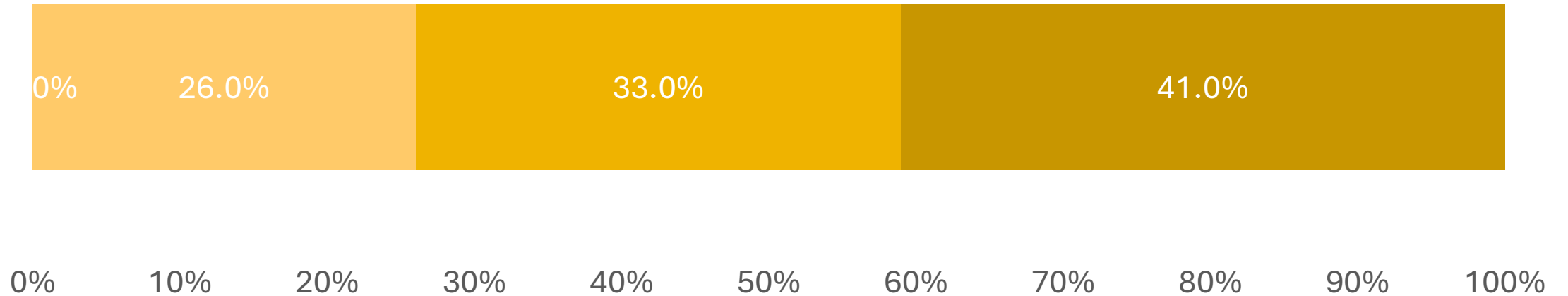


Minimum = 9, Maximum = 161, Average = 88.8



# Current State of Your FSMS – Large Brands

■ Nonexistent   ■ Underdeveloped   ■ Well developed   ■ Well developed & documented





# FSMS – Sources of Input

Input used to create food safety procedures	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)	
Owner	547	77.9	
Managers	488	69.5	
Health department/inspectors	431	61.4	
Employees who handle food	334	47.6	
Shift leaders/person in charge	301	42.9	
Food safety training companies	182	25.9	
Provided by corporate/my company	102	14.5	
Third-party auditors	56	8.0	
Industry trade associations	48	6.8	
Extension service/universities	15	2.1	
Unknown	5	0.7	
Other	5	0.7	
	Not applicable	2	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>702</b>		



# FSMS – Sources of Input

Input used to create food safety procedures	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
Owner	547	77.9
Managers	488	69.5
Health department/inspectors	431	61.4
Employees who handle food	374	47.6
Shift leaders/peers	354	42.9
Food safety training	274	25.9
Provided by corporate/my company	102	14.5
Third-party auditors	56	8.0
Industry trade associations	48	6.8
Extension service/universities	15	2.1
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Not applicable	2	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>702</b>	

**54% of Large Brands work with regulatory authorities to help develop & implement FSMS**



# Food Safety Culture: The Good News

- Majority are familiar with FSC
- Most demonstrate basic to advanced understanding
  - 88% demonstrated a good understanding in their definitions
- Accountability often shared among staff





# Define Food Safety Culture



88% demonstrated good understanding

- Clear expectations
- Empowering employees
- Protecting their customers
- Championing a culture of food safety accountability

12 % had limited understanding

- Unsure
- Not applicable
- Just a catchphrase



# Who is Accountable for Food Safety?

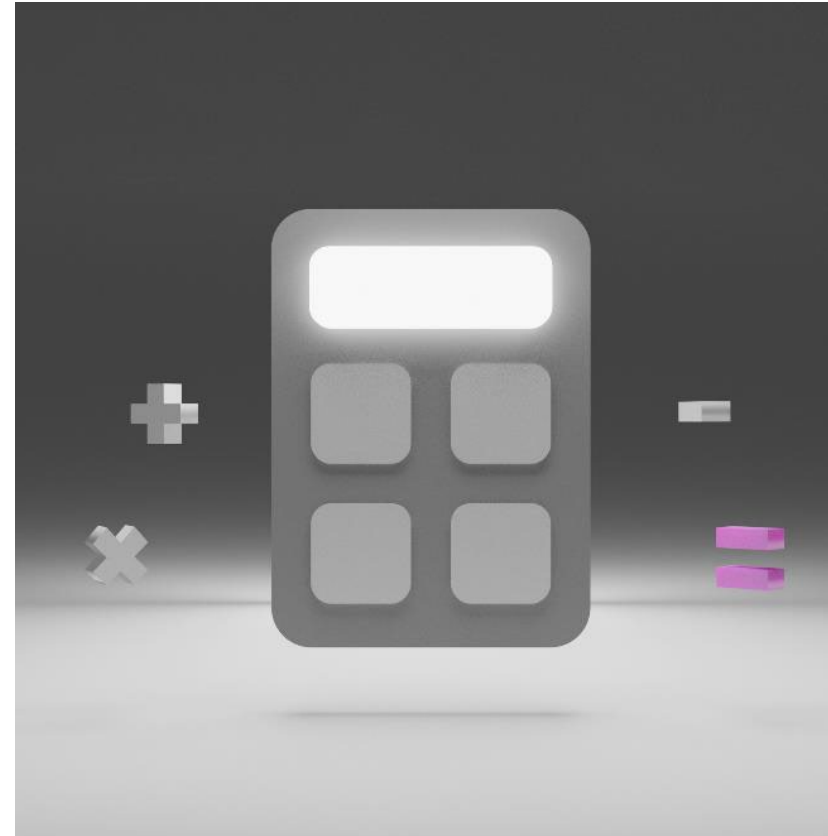
Who is accountable for food safety in establishments?	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
Managers	505	82.0
Owner	471	76.5
Employees who handle food	439	71.3
Shift leaders/person in charge	372	60.4
Health department/inspectors	147	23.9
Third-party auditors	31	5.0
Unsure	2	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>616</b>	

*Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*



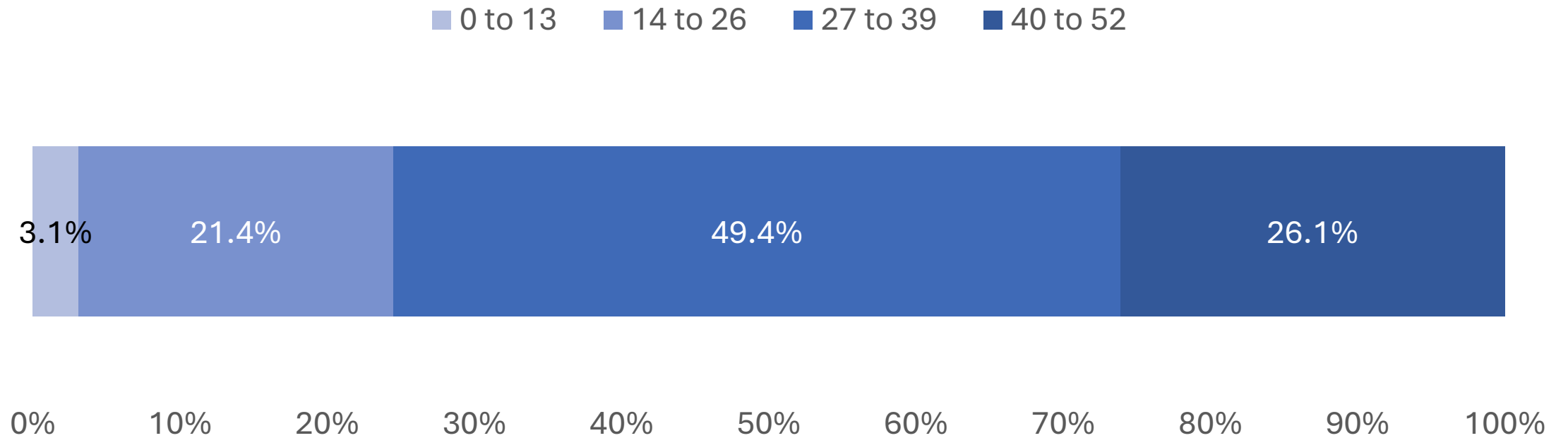
# Food Safety Culture Maturity – Composite Score Calculation

- Created a similar composite score for food safety culture
- Survey included 10 of 37 questions designed to capture core FSC principles
- This score reflected the strength of a business's FSC
- Weights applied to specific response options that more strongly reflected key cultural attributes





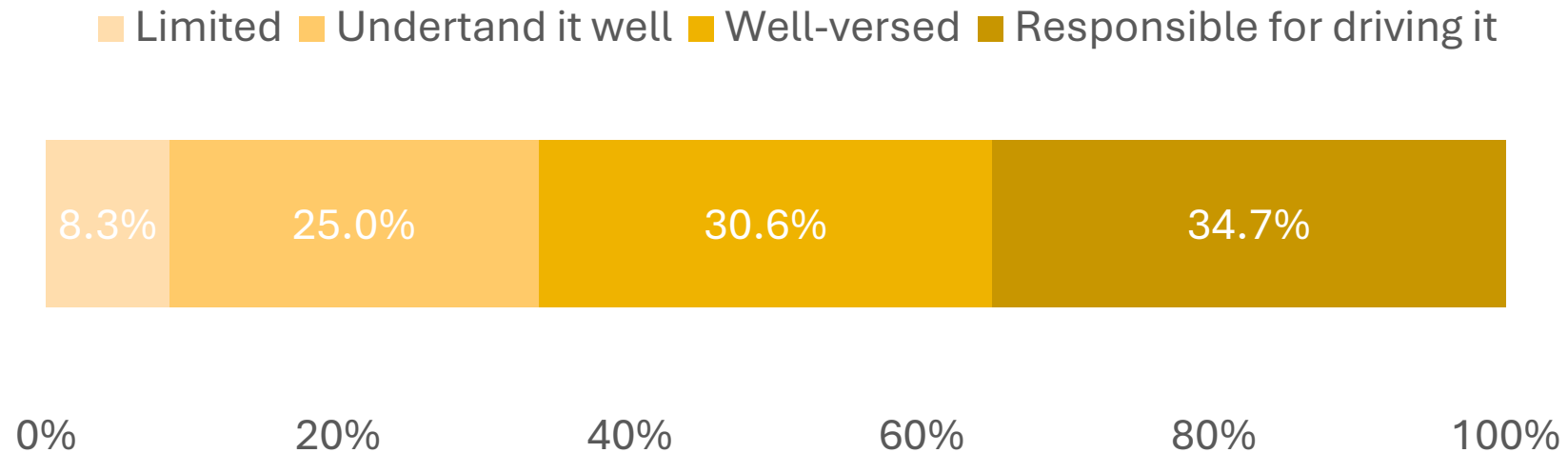
# Food Safety Culture Weighted Score – Small Businesses



Minimum = 0, Maximum = 52, Average = 32.5



# Understanding of Food Safety Culture – Large Brands



# Rule & Code Awareness

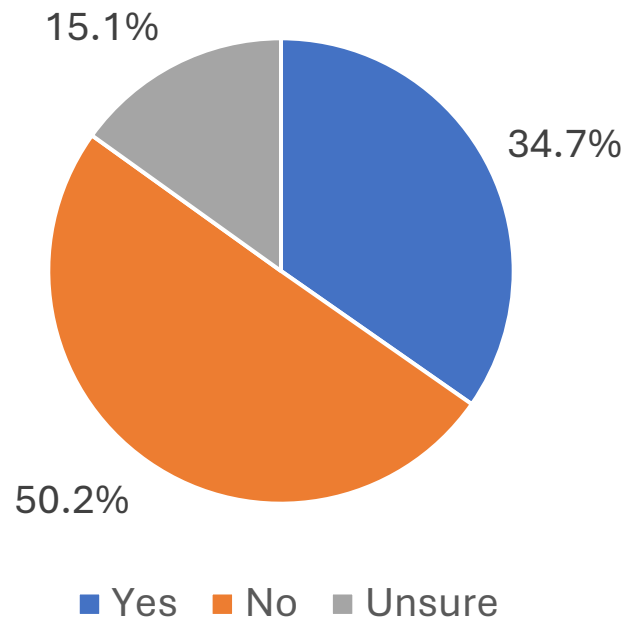
- How familiar are small businesses with Traceability Rule & uniform rule code adoption?



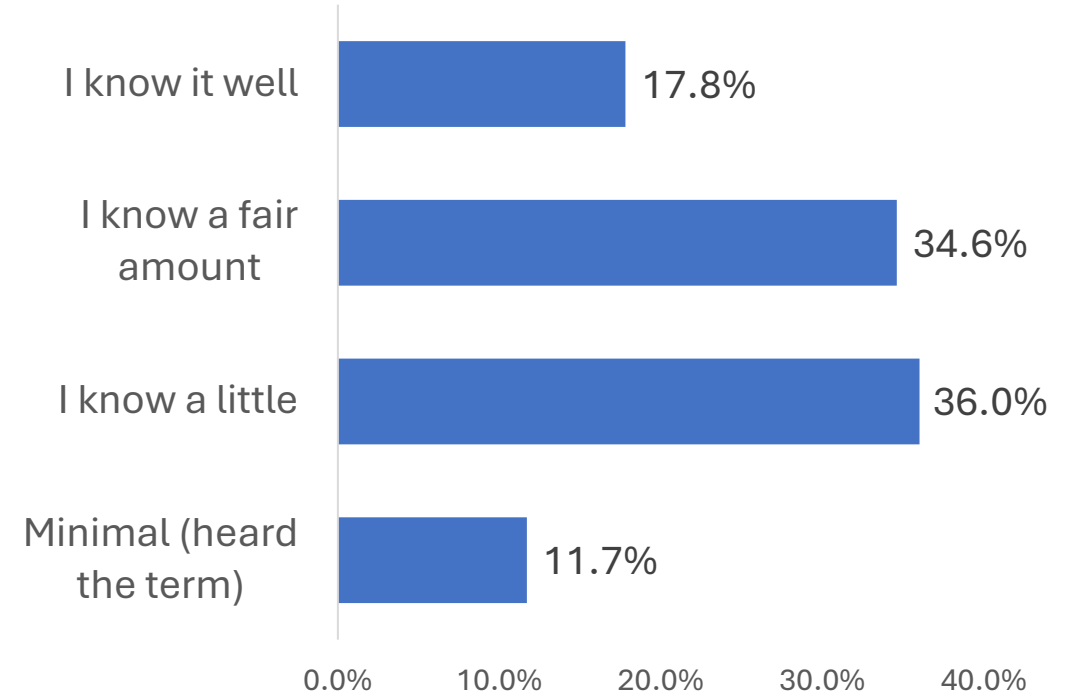


# Traceability Rule Awareness

Are you aware of the new FDA Food Traceability Rule?



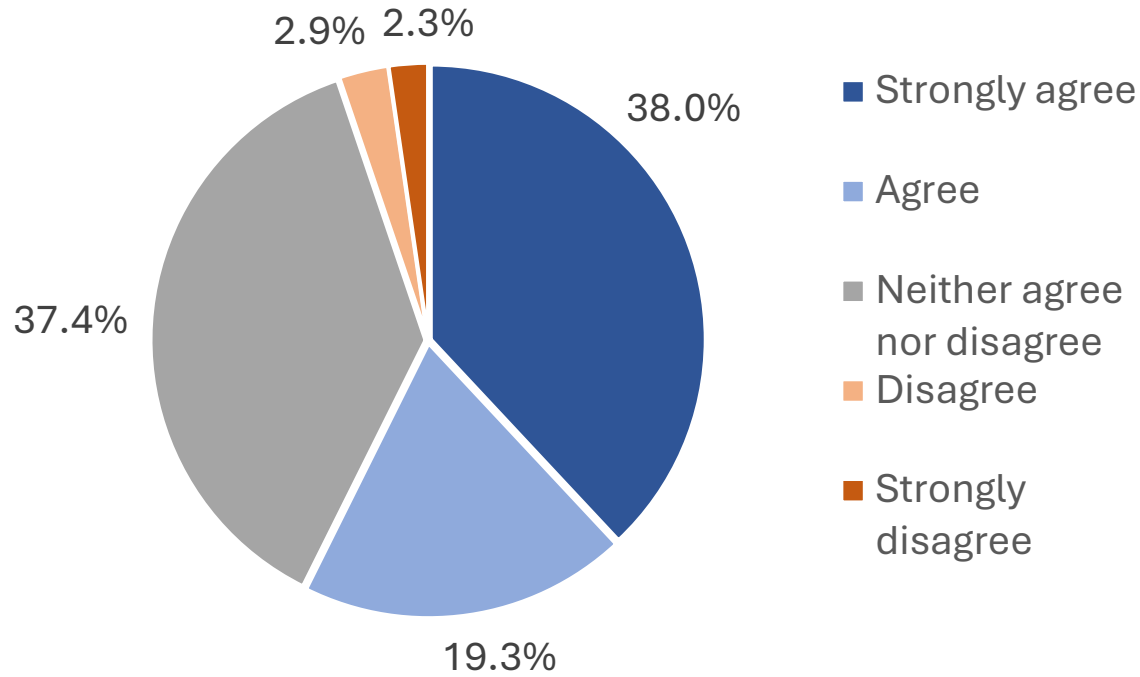
If yes, select your level of understanding



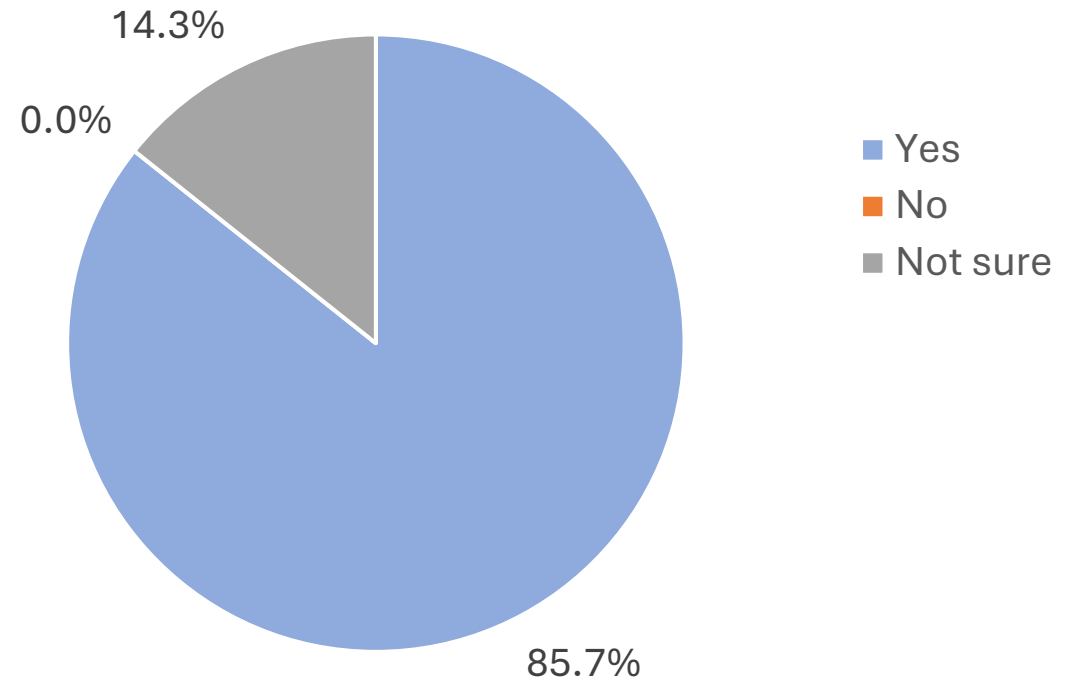


# Uniform Food Code Adoption

**Small Businesses:** My business would benefit



**Large Brands:** My business would benefit





# Comparing Small Businesses with Large Brands

- Large Brands

- Internal food safety teams
- Well-developed systems
- Third-party audits

- Small Businesses

- Inspectors
- Less developed systems
- Owner-driven practices





# Food Safety Improvement Sources

Sources of ideas to improve food safety	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
Health department/inspectors	521	84.9
Food manager/food handler training courses or continuing education	453	73.8
Manager suggestions	346	56.4
Employee suggestions	332	54.1
Observations at other food businesses	323	52.6
Internet/social media	166	27.0
Industry trade association	161	26.2
Unsure	14	2.3
Other	12	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>617</b>	

*Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*



# Evidence of Regulatory Reliance

- #1 source for ideas to improve food safety (85%)
  - #2: Food manager/handler training courses
- #1 source for food safety signs and training handouts (71%)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> most likely source of food safety procedures input (61%)
  - Owner (78%) and Managers (70%)





# Food Safety Improvement Sources

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<b>Total</b>	<b>617</b>	

**63% of Large Brands solicit and encourage ideas to improve food safety at all levels**

*Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*



# A Core Finding: Inspectors are a Key Source of Food Safety Support

- Inspector input shapes procedures, training & improvement
- Inspections cited as key assurance tool





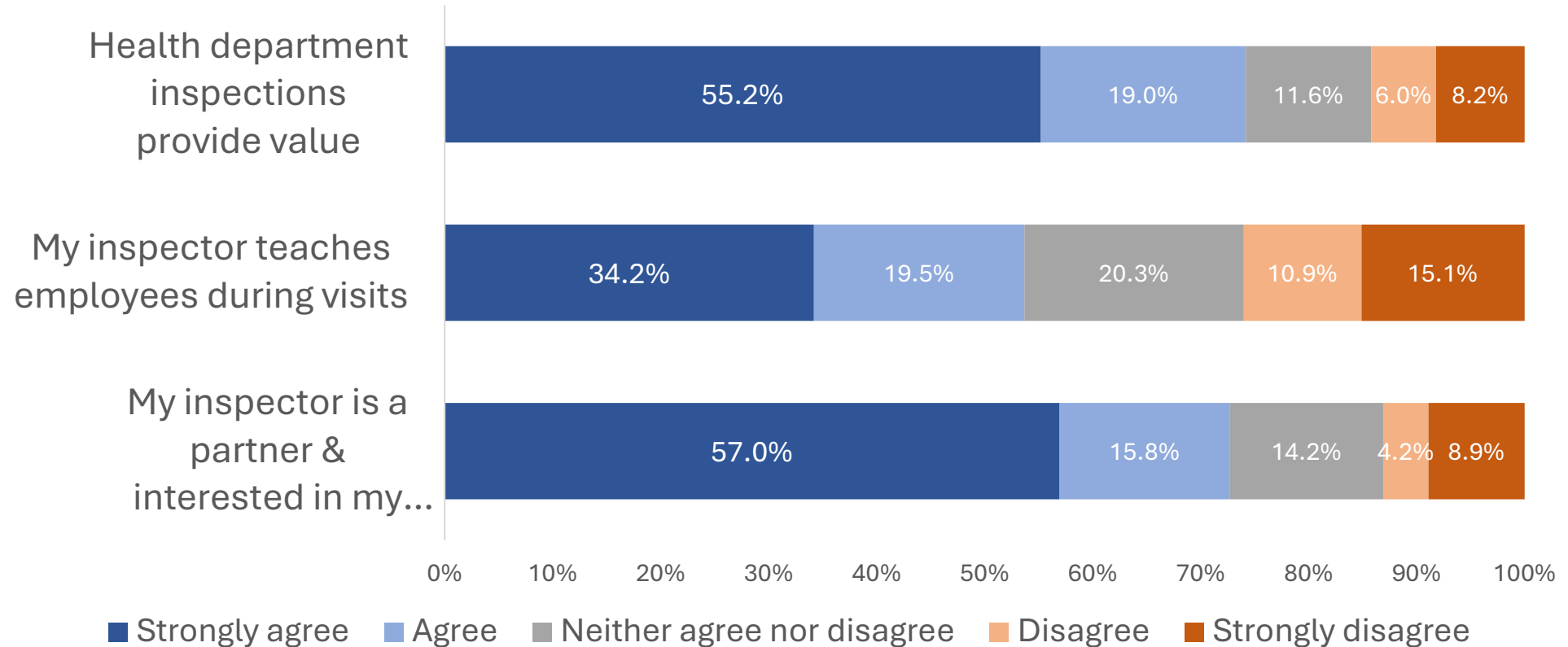
# Inspection Feedback

What would you change about the inspections done by your food inspector?	Frequency, n	Percentage of Small Businesses (%)
No change suggested	152	33.6
More compliments or positive feedback	91	20.1
Share more feedback, educate before you regulate (floors, walls, ceiling vs. risk-based)	45	10.0
Inspection format, style, or requirements	39	8.6
Timing of inspection visit	35	7.7
Forceful approach, poor attitude, ethical issues	27	6.0
More frequent inspection visits	24	5.3
Lack of consistency	20	4.4
Less frequent inspection visits	2	0.4
N/A, Unsure	34	7.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>452</b>	

*Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*



# Food Inspection Value



# Key Takeaways



# Unique Characteristics and Challenges of Small Businesses

- Survey respondents did not identify with traditional retail categories of restaurant, grocery store, or c-store
- Absence of independent verifications mechanisms like HACCP plans (34%) and 3<sup>rd</sup> party audits (9%)





# FSMS and Food Safety Culture Implementation

- Many small businesses demonstrate positive FSMS and FSC characteristics
  - 88% have basic FSC understanding
- However, foundational food safety practices remain inconsistently implemented
  - Only 57% conducted line checks and hot/cold-holding
  - Written policies are frequently lacking
- Large brands have more tools, well-developed FSMS
  - 74% have well-developed FSMS
  - 50% hire the right technical competency to manage food safety
  - 91% participate in food safety audit program





# Training & Certification Gaps

- While 98% reported providing some form of training, only 58% offered Food Manager Certification
- 20% lacked a credential or were unsure if they had one
- In-house training was common (54%), but its effectiveness & consistency are unknown





# Considerable Reliance of Small Businesses on Regulatory Agencies and Food Inspectors



Generated with ChatGPT

- 80%** Cited health department **inspections as a key tool** for ensuring food safety
- 85%** Reported seeking **improvement ideas** from their inspectors
- 71%** Use food safety **signs and training materials** from their health department
- 61%** **Rely on inspectors** to help shape their food safety procedures



# Compared with Large Brands...



- 15%** Reported **inconsistent findings** between inspections and audit programs
- 89%** Said **audits** identify **more** food safety risk factors than inspections

# Recommendations

## 1. Recognize and support the **regulatory role** in small business food safety

- Expand inspector training to include coaching and consultative skills.
- Provide inspectors with tools to deliver tailored, risk-based education during inspections.
- Develop easy-to-use, validated training materials that inspectors can share on-site.



# Recommendations

2. Reframe inspections for small businesses as **engaged, dialogue-based** public health interventions
  - Shift from a checklist mentality to a dialogue-based model that explores the “why” and “how” behind current practices.
  - Prioritize education and capacity-building over punitive measures, especially for first-time or low-risk violations.
  - Encourage inspectors to identify opportunities for improvement and co-create solutions with operators





# Recognition & Thank You

Carrie Rigdon, [crigdon@afdo.org](mailto:crigdon@afdo.org)

Deanna Copeland, [dcopeland@afdo.org](mailto:dcopeland@afdo.org)

Recognition:

Sally Flowers, Scientific Affairs Director

Steve Mandernach, Executive Director

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