

COVID-19 Playbook Provides Guiding Light for Nebraska's Meat Processing Industry

In 2020, COVID-19 required a lot of quick thinking, diligence and fast reaction in order to overcome the many unexpected and unique challenges created by the pandemic.

That was especially true in the meat processing industry where mitigating the spread of the virus and protecting employees were essential to keep one of the nation's vital links in the food chain operating.

Since Nebraska is second in the nation in commercial red meat production (7.9 million pounds annually), it was critical for the state to develop and implement a plan that could provide guidelines and directions for its essential meat processing industry.

Taking Action

Under the leadership of **Governor Pete Ricketts** and **Nebraska Department of Agriculture** Director Steve Wellman, stakeholders were brought together to identify the greatest areas of concerns and begin developing solutions.

"We received calls early on that we were having disruption in the processing of our livestock," Director Wellman said. "The Governor received many of the same calls from top managers at meat processing facilities trying to find solutions to mitigate the spread of the virus."



Graphics courtesy of the Global Center for Health Security.



The Global Center for Health Security team conducted site visits to gather information from meat processing facilities. Photo courtesy of GCHS.

Soon, weekly calls were established with Gov. Ricketts, Director Wellman and representatives of the various impacted industries.

“Our primary goal was putting together a plan to keep the employees at the processing facilities safe, which in turn would keep them operating,” said Wellman. “And we wanted to make sure we did this in a cooperative, not a regulatory manner.”

The Governor took advantage of having some of the top pandemic experts in the world based in Nebraska and invited a team from the **Global Center for Health Security** (GCHS) in Omaha to lead the discussion. Part of the **University of Nebraska Medical Center** (UNMC), the Health Security Center’s team was

comprised of Executive Director Shelly Schwedhelm, Dr. John-Martin Lowe, Dr. James Lawler and Dr. Jocelyn Herstein.

Gathering Data

Initially, the GCHS team took input from the top administrators of the facilities, and then followed up with site visits to get a better picture of what was happening at the ground-level. The site visits started with stops at pork and chicken processing facilities near Fremont.



Shelly Schwedhelm

“We began to see escalating concerns in several packing plant communities,” GCHS’s Schwedhelm said. “We ended up doing a total of 16 site

visits that provided us with a lot of first-hand information as to what was happening at these plants.”



Athena Ramos

In order to collect even more input from plant workers, GCHS took advantage of yet another resource within UNMC. They connected with Athena Ramos, an assistant professor at the College of Public Health who studies health and safety of workers within the agri-food system.

“We thought we should hear directly from the workers about what they were experiencing every day when they would go to work,” said Ramos. “We wanted to understand what some of the barriers were that existed for them to receive information or resources.”

Ramos and her team put together a survey aimed at gathering input from the workers. It was available in English, Spanish and French and heavily promoted through social media, immigrant support groups, and influencers among the various cultural communities.

In just three short weeks, more than 600 usable responses were received from plant workers in several states, with 443 of those coming from Nebraska.

“The survey provided us with valuable information that we were able to share with the GCHS team,” said Ramos. “We were able to find out important

information such as if active screening protocols were being used, if masks were being required and provided, if there was multilingual signage being posted and if dividers had been installed.”

The information from the site visits and survey proved to be vital data needed to develop what would become **The Meat Processing Facility COVID-19 Playbook**.

What We Didn't Know Then

Best practices to mitigate COVID-19 that we now consider as commonplace, were not so in the early stages of the pandemic. So much was unknown about the virus, particularly its ability to spread quickly.

Due to the nature of the environment of the meat processing facilities, workers were especially susceptible to contracting COVID-19 without specific best practices in place.

Based on findings from site visits, the worker survey, and input from plant supervisors, GCHS team members were able to formulate a “playbook” that provided guidance on best practices that the processing companies could implement.

“This included such things as universal mask wearing, plastic barriers between workers, thorough handwashing, and health screening upon entry,”

said Schwedhelm. “Once we had the initial playbook developed, we made sure it could be easily accessed online as needed.”

The playbook also included an audit tool that allowed facility leaders to track the progress of the implementation of the suggested best practices.

Schwedhelm said that the approach taken by the GCHS was an important step for the meat processing companies in implementing the guidelines in the playbook.

“We presented ourselves as being available to help and provide technical assistance,” she added. “We weren’t a regulatory group.”

One of the meat processing facilities in Nebraska that took advantage of the GCHS team’s expertise and guidance in the playbook was JBS Grand Island.

Facing the Challenges

JBS USA is one of the largest meat processors in the world with locations in several countries, including a significant presence in the United States. Grand Island has been a long-time home to one of JBS’s meat processing plants that currently employs about 3,600 people.

As the city’s largest employer, leaders at JBS Grand Island quickly understood the need to implement best practices to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

“Our division president, Tim Schellpeper, worked with Gov. Ricketts to arrange a visit with members of the Global Center for Health Security team,” said former JBS Grand Island General Manager Zack Ireland. “They are the experts in protecting public health and provided the platform for implementing best practices through the playbook.”



JBS employees followed guidance on universal mask wearing, amongst other best practices. Photos courtesy of JBS USA.



Translated signage and plexiglass barriers were installed at a JBS meat processing plant. Photo courtesy of JBS USA.

Ireland said that even some of the common best practices didn't come without challenges. Installing plexiglass barriers in a facility built in 1965 meant finding creative ways to install brackets and hangers to secure them. The use of masks needed to be encouraged beyond just the facility which meant wearing them in other public places or even carpooling. Conducting initial screenings upon entering the facility needed to go beyond temperature checks.

"That was something we worked on with the GCHS team," said Ireland. "Since the virus was new, we had to learn to ask the right questions because we were learning new things about the symptoms as we went along."

Then there was the challenge of communication because English was not a primary language for many of the workers. Spanish,

Arabic and Somali were three main languages, besides English, spoken at the JBS plant.

Schwedhelm said that the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** provided helpful resources such as brochures and signage that were available in several languages.

"We also depended on influential leaders in the various diverse groups within the communities to assist in communicating



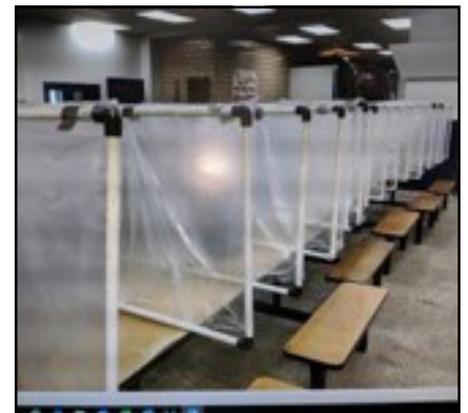
and educating the workers on methods to mitigate the spread of COVID," Schwedhelm added.

Another important factor in mitigating the spread of the virus was understanding airflow in the facility.

"We were learning new information on an ongoing basis," said Ireland. "We found out the direction of airflow was important and that we could use UV lighting in the air ducts to kill harmful viruses."

With JBS USA facilities located in several states throughout the country, it made sense that the Grand Island managers work with their partners in mitigating the spread of COVID.

"We had a large cooperative effort in JBS where we would share best practices between our plants and business units," said Ireland. "The degree of assistance and collaboration we had in Nebraska was definitely stronger than what we were hearing from other states. There



Best practices include use of personal protective equipment, spatial separation and physical barriers. Photos courtesy of GCHS.

were many things the GCHS team was able to bring to our attention and help us greatly with the playbook.”

Cooperative effort was key in creating the playbook that proved to be a much-needed guide for managers and administrators to

follow as they worked diligently to keep their employees safe and plants operating.

Gov. Ricketts and Director Wellman brought together key stakeholders in a critical situation that provided input and action. In the end, a playbook was created

and shared that gave guidance to a situation that was unique and, at times, unpredictable. By implementing best practices, the spread of COVID-19 was mitigated, improving the overall work environment for employees and helping to provide security to the nation’s food chain.

Rising to the Occasion

Early in 2020, as COVID-19 made its quick march across the country, it became evident that hand sanitation was critical in mitigating the spread of the virus. As a result, products used to kill harmful germs and viruses were soon in critical short supply.

In Nebraska, two quick-thinking ethanol advocates spearheaded an effort that eventually led to the production of more than 200,000 gallons of much

needed hand sanitizer. This was vitally important as much of the product was donated to first responders, health care workers, educators and law enforcement personnel.

“The project as a whole took a great deal of collaborative effort from the ethanol industry, businesses, the

University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) and volunteers,” **Nebraska Ethanol Board** Administrator Roger Berry said. “Special thanks go out to our Board Chairman Jan tenBensel and our technical advisor Hunter Flodman for providing the leadership and organization needed to get the job done.”



Jan tenBensel

Flodman, an associate professor at UNL, and tenBensel, who farms near Cambridge, bridged together partnerships between the ethanol plants and the **Food Processing Center** at

Nebraska Innovation Campus that provided the materials, production facilities and labor needed to produce, package and ship tens of thousands of containers of hand sanitizer that were distributed across Nebraska and to USDA food inspection offices across the United States.



Hunter Flodman

“As COVID slowed activity around the world, ethanol production also dramatically decreased,” said Berry. “That meant an excess of product. Fortunately we had some smart people who found a way to utilize the extra ethanol.”

It took numerous volunteers and countless hours to keep the project running at full capacity for four solid months.

“It was worth it,” Flodman said. “We were able to provide a much-needed product that assisted in

keeping essential workers safer during the pandemic.”

For more details on how the hand sanitizer project was developed and executed, listen to this **Leading Nebraska** podcast produced by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.