

Meat Processing Vocational Training for Inmates

*The Meat Processing Vocational Training Pilot Program at the
Northeastern Regional Corrections Center*



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Executive Summary

Inmates placed at the Northeastern Regional Corrections Center (NERCC) in Saginaw, Minnesota are assigned to participate in daily work crew activities as part of their rehabilitation. Through these assignments, inmates receive informal training for meat processing skills. This project is working to formalize these training opportunities for inmates so that they may use this experience to help them find viable employment after their release. Several barriers to implementing traditional training phases exist in this training environment. The formal training program will need to consider that potential participants may have different educational levels and learning abilities, limited or variable time to work in the meat processing plant and other factors that will affect the kind of training that can be delivered. The pilot program is working to implement a flexible training program that will provide opportunities for participants to document formal training and receive the basic foundational skills that will help them in the future job market. Because no formal certification or accreditation process exists for meat processing training programs, a customized approach can be implemented to address the challenges unique to this training environment.

Introduction

Funds were allocated during the 2015 legislative session to study and provide recommendations for upgrading the existing processing facility located on the NERCC campus into a USDA certified-food processing facility, as well as support a correctional facility vocational training pilot program. The 2016 legislative report documented the challenges of successfully implementing a vocational training program at NERCC and provided a review of financial and resource considerations, employment outlook, inspection and food safety details, and the next steps towards development of the program. (Minnesota Department of Agriculture 2016, Meat Processing for Inmates). This report adds to the prior documentation by detailing the research, program development and coordination that has been performed since the first submission. It is intended to provide an overview of this work, as well as a description of the pilot program curriculum, current challenges, and potential options for moving forward with formal training, and resources that may be needed to do so.

Background

The NERCC is a minimum security correctional institution within the Arrowhead Regional Corrections system located in rural Saginaw, Minnesota. The NERCC has the capacity to house 144 adult males with offense categories ranging from probation violations to criminal sexual offenses (Arrowhead Regional Corrections, 2016). NERCC provides rehabilitation programs to offenders with the intent of preventing recidivism. These programs include participating in daily work crews that involve preparing food in the kitchen, maintaining the grounds, caring for animals, harvesting produce, and processing meat.

The meat processing operation is licensed and permitted as a “custom exempt” and a Minnesota “Equal To” slaughter and processing facility which currently serves area farmers by processing animals and returning them to their owners, as well as providing meat for their own commissaries. Occasionally, NERCC has slaughtered and processed poultry for private individuals or area farmers for wholesale purposes that required inspection. The “Equal To” designation provides NERCC with the ability to process both meat and poultry products for wholesale within the State of Minnesota.

Offenders assigned to the meat processing work crew participate in the slaughter and processing activities necessary to butcher the animals. Currently, offenders learn slaughter and processing skills by hands-on participation in the daily activities; however, there is no official, documented training that takes place in association with this experience. This project was created to take advantage of the work experiences that already occur at the meat processing facility and develop and implement a formal meat processing training programs for residents at NERCC. The intent would be to provide technical level training that would help offenders find employment more easily after their release.

In addition, this program can meet the needs of meat processors, particularly small, local processors, for prospective employees. In a survey of meat processors conducted in association with the 2016 feasibility study (Minnesota Department of Agriculture 2016, Meat Processing for Inmates) 63 percent of respondents indicated that it was moderately or very difficult to hire entry level personnel. In addition, processors indicated that beginning pay could be higher for individuals with previous experience. The majority of the processors also indicated that they would hire someone with previous training, even if they had a prior criminal history such as

those like the residents at NERCC. Such a program has the potential to not only teach work experience and skills, but to fill this employment need.

Training Program Overview

The objective of the proposed training program is to integrate work experience NERCC residents already receive into a more formal training program that will provide the participants more opportunities for employment in the meat sector after their release. By providing a pool of trained individuals, the program would also assist the meat industry in obtaining qualified individuals to work in their plants. Ultimately, the program has the potential to benefit the local economy, including meat processors and farmers who use those processors for locally grown food, as well as the program's participants.

The foundational work for this project began with research into existing meat processing training programs in the United States to determine if other training programs or phases existed which could be incorporated or built upon in the development of this program. Also, the program coordinator worked with NERCC staff to determine how such a program could be implemented into the current NERCC systems, and what barriers or limitations existed which might prove difficult or be a challenge to success.

Overview of Existing Programs in the United States:

Certification or Accreditation Requirements

There are currently no uniform training program requirements or accreditations that monitor or oversee meat processing certifications in the United States. The programs that do exist create their own training modules and develop their own requirements for achieving a certification. As such, these programs vary considerably in length of instruction, cost and content. Because there is no national standard or accrediting agency for meat processing employees, the program designed for the NERCC system can be completely unique and designed to accommodate the NERCC situation. Courses offered are both in-person and online, with content variable by type of training and certification offered. In addition to those listed below, there are a variety of very short, topic-specific courses offered across the country through university extension services which may or may not offer a certificate of completion.

Examples of Programs

Gateway Community College, Maricopa Skills Center, Arizona (<http://www.gatewaycc.edu/meat-cutting>)

The Maricopa Skills Center at Gateway Community College offers two meat cutting courses of significant length and content:

- **Apprentice Meat Cutting (882 hours)** – Participants are trained to use all meat processing equipment, identify, cut, wrap, weigh and display all retail cuts of meat, and break down and process a variety of meats like cattle, hogs, lamb, elk, deer, antelope and javelina.
- **Meat Department Helper (532 hours)** – Participants are trained to assist meat cutters by preparing meats to be cut, trimming and packaging retail cuts of meat, stocking and rotating meat coolers and freezers, as well as properly wrapping, stocking, rotating and maintaining all related meat cases.

State University of New York, College of Agriculture and Technology, Cobleskill, New York

This course, which is intermittent, offers a six-day Meat Cutting Skills Training Certificate. This course is designed to help those who already have one year of meat processing experience to refine their cutting skills with beef and pork and receive training in sanitation and HACCP plans.

Buckeye Career Center, Ohio (<http://buckeyecareercenter.org/high-school/career-programs/meat-cutting,-deli-bakery.aspx>)

This program is designed for juniors and seniors in high school and provides a year educational experience. Participants learn to identify, cut, wrap, and merchandise a wide variety of meat and cheese products, operate a full-service meat, deli, and bakery department while completing client orders on schedule, as well as to operate, maintain, and clean all professional food preparation equipment. There is no formal certification granted for this program.

Vermont Tech, Vermont (<https://www.vtc.edu/meat-cutting-master-training>)

This program has multiple training programs, each designed to fulfill a specific niche and when all completed result in the receipt of a Meat Cutting Master certificate.

- Meat Cutting Master Training, Butchering Basics – A 50 hour program where participants are trained to cut up a chicken, breakdown a lamb, pig or beef carcass into primal and sub primal, retail and table ready cuts, as well as produce value added meat products. They also provide training in safety and knife skills, and gross profit margins as applied to meat retail and cutting tests.
- Meat Cutting Master Training, From Pasture to Freezer – A basic 14 hour program where participants are trained in all aspects of processing an individual animal from start to finish. Student learn safe and humane slaughtering techniques, safe and legal processing methods, standard cuts, food safety, proper packing, and state and federal regulations around meat processing.

Proposed Curriculum

The curriculum being proposed and used for implementation of the pilot program is a hybrid of the different phases already available and strives to accommodate the unique needs of the NERCC environment. Also, the delivery method used must be able to be incorporated into NERCC's current systems and address challenges with learning styles and abilities that may be present in the diversity of individuals that may participate in the program.

To provide the foundation for the curriculum, the MDA has worked to create a basic and content-appropriate curriculum for the program. Multiple avenues of delivery have been considered, as well as various levels of content. Extensive research was conducted on sanitation, safety, slaughter, and meat processing by online and in text guides. Key information on the development of core competencies for this training program was also gathered through phone interviews with local meat processors to determine the most important skills they would like to see in an entry level meat processor at their facility.

Core Competencies

Through discussion with owners of small meat processing plants in rural areas of Minnesota, the following core competencies have been developed and proposed:

1. Hygiene/Sanitation
2. Knife and Equipment Safety
3. Slaughter- Humane slaughter, quartering of animal
4. Butchering Basics: Animal breeds, Safety and Knife Skills for the Butchering
5. Animal Breakdown
 - a. Chicken/Turkey breakdown, cuts and value added products such as K-bobs, thin breast.
 - b. Hog breakdown into primals, subprimals, retail, table ready cuts and value added products.
 - c. Beef breakdown into primals, subprimals, retail, table ready cuts and value added products.
6. Cutting, wrapping, packaging, and labeling of the cuts

The expectation would be that the training program would, at a minimum, cover these main areas so that potential employers can be assured that participants have received at a least a basic level or introduction to these topics.

Delivery of Content

The standard classroom phase of content delivery presents several challenges in this situation. Specifically, the potential participants will have differing levels of education, reading ability, learning styles, and attention span. According to several NERCC case managers, the residents prefer hands on and tangible instruction. In the pilot program, the intent is to expand on the current hands-on instruction already received by residents during work

experience by supplementing it with targeted work experiences and limited, interactive classroom or online instruction. Any classroom style instruction, whether delivered in-person or online, must be interactive and make use of animations, audio/video capabilities and various testing formats.

Potential Partnerships

Numerous ideas for potential partnerships with area meat processors, other training programs or institutions for trainers, livestock, educational materials, delivery options and employment opportunities are being explored. For example, several of the meat processors who were interviewed regarding curriculum also offered to train the participants for a day during the program. This would not only provide excellent training but also a chance for the participants to interact with potential employers. Once the pilot program is underway, these options can be incorporated as appropriate to enhance the quality of the program and to provide training in a cost effective manner.

Current Challenges for Implementation

As of the publishing of this report, the pilot program is nearing the implementation phase; however it has not yet officially begun documenting work experiences. Several challenges exist which have, and will continue to make implementation challenging in the near term. The NERCC program coordinator has been working with NERCC administration and staff to address challenges that can be addressed and to find solutions. Specific challenges include:

- NERCC's meat processing facility: Work on the training program has slowed considerably as the expected new meat processing facility project was not initiated during the past year as expected. The new facility is necessary to provide an improved food safety environment, increased teaching capacity, and increased slaughter and processing capacity. Those factors are also necessary to ensure that participants in the program can receive adequate experience, in both length of experience and content. Without a new facility, the training program is significantly limited in the extent of experience that can be provided. The facility is also essential to ensuring that NERCC can continue to meet state regulations with respect to meat processing plants; it is essential that any training program be done in a facility that is in compliance with regulations so that participants can also be trained to conduct work in a manner consistent with the requirements.
- Lack of tangible data about current work experiences at NERCC: Solid data on the number of individuals who currently work in the processing plant and their tenure is not available. It is difficult to determine how long a training program can be without data available in this area. Data will begin to be collected as work experiences are documented. This will help provide a foundation for decisions about program content.
- Length of stay and time available to work: The current length of stay at the NERCC facility is usually 90 days or less, and is highly variable based on the offender's offense and sentence. Many offenders have lengths of stay that are less than 30 days. Also, offenders can arrive and leave anytime which makes setting a specific timeframe for a formal course difficult. While at NERCC, residents are also required to participate in various treatment and education programs that take precedence over work assignments. With these two considerations, it is difficult to structure a one-size-fits-all program simply due to scheduling issues.
- Desirability of training to offenders: Meat processing work is difficult work and some offenders may not be a good fit for this work. Discussions with the intake specialist that assigns work crews has shown the same sentiment; many residents do not want to work in meat slaughter and many times after working at the plant may ask to be reassigned. Anecdotally, some residents do demonstrate interest in meat processing and are interested in a formal certification program. The MDA believes there will be enough interest and participation in the program to warrant creation of a formal program. Once a formal program is in place, incoming residents may be more interested knowing that their work experience may provide some additional return.

Options for Implementation

As mentioned above, there are several barriers to creating a traditionally structured training programs. To resolve these issues, the MDA coordinated with NERCC's intake specialist and the current meat processing supervisor to discuss the potential options. To overcome these issues, it will be important to provide different certification options and work experience requirements that can fit with an offender's personal sentence, interest, and other required commitments (treatment programs, GED, etc.). This will allow participants with a shorter stay or other commitments throughout part of the workday the ability to finish a portion of the curriculum and still receive formal documentation to present to future employers that the work and training has been completed.

Phase 1

Summary

The objective of this training program would be to use existing resources to work within existing systems to implement a very basic training program. The goal will be to formally document the experience and hands-on learning received by inmates working in the meat processing plant so that upon release individuals are able to demonstrate to prospective employers the type, amount and diversity of experience they have received. Phase 1 would be based on the premise that the current funding for program coordination will continue; however, no additional funding would be available to the program in the short-term. This phase works around many of the limitations that exist within the NERCC system which make implementing a more structured training program difficult and resource intensive, and would provide limited disruption to the NERCC system.

Enrolling Participants

Participants would be enrolled into the program similarly to how participants are now; specifically, they would be screened using NERCC's current criteria for assigning residents to the meat processing plant with work assigned to those eligible and interested. Additional information about the training program and its benefits will be provided to inmates when they are screened to promote increased levels of program participation. Potentially, the program could have a similar number of participants as there are currently slaughter plant workers as there would not be any significant criteria limiting participation.

Training Components

Specific components of this program would include limited online/classroom training and experiential learning, with the focus largely on experiential learning.

- Classroom/online training: As a part of this program, some interactive training online modules will be developed to provide basic training in safety and basic techniques; however, in-depth training materials would not be developed, at least initially. Over time, the program coordinator would be able to incorporate and develop more interactive modules which could be optional for program participants, or perhaps made more widely available to participants after leaving the NERCC or to other meat processors for their employees.
- Experiential learning: A checklist will be used to keep track of the work time that each participant has put into sanitation, safety, slaughter, meat processing, and wrapping. As an inmate receives experience in a relevant area, the section would be checked off as completed and include the number of hours spent in each area.

Documentation and Certification of Training

Upon completion of their time at NERCC, the participants would be provided a summary document detailing their experiences and other training they have received, which would include the areas in which they received training and the number of hours they spent working in specific areas of meat or poultry processing. This document would be a formal documentation of their experience but not a certificate of completion as the coursework will be less defined and more variable.

Advantages

This program can be accomplished with the current \$75,000 appropriation for this work and would not require additional resources for trainers. This is important because NERCC does not have staff available to act as trainers; in addition, subject matter experts would be needed for more formal training programs.

Also, this training model provides the advantage of being customizable per individual participant and the amount of time they are able to dedicate to it during their time spent at NERCC. Individuals with more time working in the processing plant and longer stays at the NERCC will be able to document more experience and hours, which will be valuable information to present to future employers. Individuals with less time in the program can still have their time and experiences documented, but it will be proportional to their time spent at the facility.

This model also provides great flexibility and can be worked more easily into the current schedules and needs of NERCC staff and the inmates. This flexibility would allow maximum participation by NERCC inmates and likely achieve a much greater interest in participation. The components of this program also fit better with the learning styles of NERCC inmates, who often learn better in hands-on experiential types of learning environments versus classroom style learning situations.

No additional funding would be necessary to hire trainers as NERCC personnel and the training program coordinator can manage enrollment, development of basic modules and documentation of training experiences. Furthermore, this model can be enhanced over time. As the basic components become more available and formalized, the program coordinator will have more time to develop additional interactive online modules to supplement the training activities. Program participants could even participate in this training after leaving the on-site NERCC program, or other meat processors could take advantage of these training modules for their own employees if it was able to be made more widely available. Additionally, more work can be done to develop working relationships or partnerships with potential employers or learning programs to provide opportunities for program participants after leaving NERCC.

Disadvantages

This model has some disadvantages. Most importantly, the experience received at NERCC is currently not consistent from one individual to another and it will be difficult to ensure that each participant receives the basic foundational experience in specific types of work or a diverse work experience. NERCC work and experience opportunities may be more available for some participants and less available for others, and there is no way to ensure that each participant has a comprehensive experience. This issue may be somewhat resolved if NERCC is able and willing to expand their slaughter and processing work as participants will have a greater likelihood of having the needed experience.

This program would not provide a certification or certificate, simply documentation of experience received. As noted earlier in this report, there are no formal certification or accreditation systems for training of meat processors and this is likely to be less of an issue for meat processors than in some other fields. During earlier survey work, meat processors indicated a significant need for employees, and particularly employees with previous experience. If the need is great, processors would likely find documentation of experience to be beneficial and not significantly different than a prospective employee providing an actual certificate. Also, after implementing the program, more information would be available to determine what level of experience inmates are receiving. This could potentially lead to creation of a target or goal for participants, after which they could receive a certificate.

Resource Needs

Phase 1 could be implemented using the current appropriation of \$75,000. Implementation can begin immediately. Also, it will be necessary to complete the NERCC construction of a new meat processing plant in order to ensure that the building is sufficient for processing and slaughter activities. This would be beneficial to help NERCC expand their capacity and provide more opportunities for experience for inmates.

Phase 2

Summary

The objective of this training model would be to create more robust, comprehensive training program for participants. This program would require additional resources to hire an on-site trainer, preferably a subject matter expert, to supplement NERCC's existing staff. The program coordinator would work with the trainer to develop a formal certificate program that would more closely match other certificate programs found around the country. The working goal would be to create two training programs or certifications that would vary based on the length of time participants are able to commit to the program.

Enrolling Participants

Participants would be enrolled into the program in a slightly different way than how inmates are currently assigned to work in the slaughter plant. During screening, additional criteria would be added to ensure participants are able to commit the time necessary to complete the program. As with Phase 1, additional information about the training program and its benefits would be provided to inmates when they are screened to promote increased levels of program participation; however, the increased level of time commitment necessary to complete the program would inherently limit the number of potential participants. Overall, participation numbers are expected to be significantly less than with Phase 1. Theoretically, this training, especially some of the online components, could also be extended to participants who begin training at NERCC for completion after they leave NERCC.

Training Components

In this phase, the MDA recommends creating two types of certifications based on the length of time the participant has available to participate in the program:

- **Short Course:** The intent of this course would be to prepare participants for work in a processing (not slaughter) environment similar to a retail meat processor like a grocery store or a small, local butcher shop with a retail outlet. This course would include 60 hours of specific training, which would be a mixture of hands-on training and classroom education. Classroom training would be mixed with interactive, web-based training exercises for greater flexibility in delivery. The Short Course would cover basic food safety/sanitation, meat processing and retail cuts for poultry, hogs, beef, and how to properly wrap, package, and tag. This course would not include slaughter and would be limited in the amount of time the participants spend in the actual slaughtering process. Rather, the focus would be on processing cuts of meat, maintaining sanitation standards, and preparing products for sale. The two week Short Course concept would be ideal for participants who have a shorter length of stay (<30 days) and are required to participate in treatment programs that limit their time on the slaughter work crew. Also, this provides a training option for those who may not be interested in the slaughter part of meat processing.
- **Full Course:** The intent of this course would be to prepare participants for work in a processing environment, including the teaching of slaughter skills and humane slaughter concepts. The course would include 100 hours of specific training, which would be a mixture of hands-on training and classroom education. The longer course would include the same topics as in the Short Course, with the addition of humane slaughter and increased hours logged in butchering. This course would be ideal for participants with longer lengths of stay (>30 days), no required participation in treatment or other educational programs, and interest in learning each area of meat processing.

Documentation and Certification of Training

Upon completion of the Short or Full Course, the participants would be awarded a certificate of completion they would be able to use to demonstrate they have achieved a specific level of training in specific skills. This course would not provide college or other educational credit, but could be a useful tool to demonstrate interest and skills to a future employer. Additional documentation would accompany the certificate and detail completion of training by topic area and hours worked in the processing plant. Also, the interactive online modules would be fully developed and likely available for use by other meat processors.

Advantages

The clear advantage to having the more formal and longer course is that participants would have the ability to gain a specific and diverse knowledge base, which will be consistent from participant to participant. The skills gained would be more extensive and participants would likely have greater overall number of hours in a variety of areas. This depth of knowledge and greater diversity of skills would likely to help participants achieve greater starting salaries as they enter the job market as it is expected they would be more marketable.

Disadvantages

This training program requires the addition of subject matter training resources to the NERCC staff as NERCC does not have the resources available to supplement this program, especially in the form of classroom training. These resources are likely to cost significantly more than the current appropriation for this project. It may also be difficult to provide a trainer with regular work if the course is not in high demand at certain times of the year. Scheduling of training would also be difficult and would likely take some adjustment by NERCC to accommodate training for some individuals within a short window or to facilitate group training by several individuals in a given time frame. Overall, the more complete courses would require NERCC to make more adjustments to their processes and procedures to accommodate training needs for individuals. These adjustments would not be impossible, but would be an issue to work through if the Phase 2 program is implemented.

Also, as noted earlier in the report, NERCC staff report that the optimal style of learning for the inmates is more hands-on due to challenges with differing levels of education, reading ability, attention span and learning styles. An increased focus on classroom training may be more difficult for some participants and may reduce participation. It is also expected that general participation levels would be significantly less for the Short or Full courses due to constraints on inmate schedules as well as individuals' lengths of stay at NERCC, many of which are less than 30 days.

Resource Needs

In addition to the base funding for project coordination and the NERCC meat processing building construction project, the MDA or NERCC would require additional subject matter expertise to conduct the additional hands-on training and classroom training required by Phase 2. The NERCC plant has very limited staff-time dedicated to its operation and most of that time is dedicated to supervisory responsibilities. The tasks required of the trainer and the skill set necessary are different than the skills and knowledge required for program coordination and would need to be hired separately. This would require additional funding to accomplish, unless part-time contract trainers were available on a very flexible basis. Also, any trainers hired must be qualified and/or trained to work in a correctional institution environment.

Next Steps

The unique nature of the NERCC environment makes implementing a vocational training program more challenging. However, because no formal program certification or accreditation is necessary, the program can be implemented in phases and in a way that provides minimal disruption to or works in conjunction with the NERCC administration and staff. The program can also be phased in so participation and educational experiences can be monitored and expanded when the ability to do so is presented.

The MDA intends to begin implementation of the Phase 1 training program during the current fiscal year using existing resources to complete foundational and logistical work. The training coordinator will begin to work with NERCC intake personnel to develop an intake procedure, as well as track data surrounding participation and enrollment/non-enrollment. Formal documents will be created to monitor work hours and work experience received during those hours. Basic interactive training courses will be developed for use in an on-line format and to provide participants with foundational training in safety, sanitation and use of equipment. After basic courses and program procedures are implemented, with participants enrolled, additional assessment of work hour opportunities and skills learned can be made.

Because a Phase 2 training program would require additional resources, initiation of the more extensive program would depend upon resource availability. The success of this phase, and to a lesser extent Phase 1, depends upon NERCC's progress in constructing a new processing plant. Updated facilities are critical to conducting more advanced training, as well as expanding plant capacity. Phase 2 cannot be easily or effectively implemented without this important resource. As mentioned, subject matter experts would be needed to conduct specific

training courses as well as to assist with hands-on work in the processing plant. Funds would be needed to hire and pay an instructor(s). Additional partnerships will also be explored to supplement this training as appropriate.

References

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