Food Business and Food Safety Licensing Wizard

State of Minnesota — Minnesota IT Services

CATEGORY:
Information Communications Technology Initiatives

CONTACT:
Cambray Crozier
Director of Communications
cambray.crozier@state.mn.us
(O) 651-201-1063
(C) 651-367-4616

INITIATION DATE:
September 2016

END DATE:
March 2017

MINNESOTA IT SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was a collaborative effort to create the [Food Business Licensing and Food Safety Wizard (http://www2.mda.state.mn.us/webapp/foodlicensingwizard/)](http://www2.mda.state.mn.us/webapp/foodlicensingwizard/) —a web-based tool that enables future **new** food business owners in Minnesota to help determine the type of license they need in Minnesota, so they can more quickly get approval to start a new business.

Food businesses are a popular entry point for entrepreneurs, especially for new Minnesota citizens, and roughly 15 percent of Minnesota's population primary language is not English. MDA has been struggling to meet the demand for educating these entrepreneurs and getting them pointed in the right direction, and those challenges are compounded when there is a language barrier.

Licensing in general – and food business licensing in particular – is a very complex topic that defies easy answers. Types of food, predominance of business, how and where the food will be made and sold all change what type of license someone needs and from which agency they obtain it. MNIT staff were invaluable in crafting an easy-to-use app from the maze of licensing laws and regulations.

This tool cuts through the complexity and makes it easy for entrepreneurs to navigate the rules and regulations they must follow to safely make and sell food. Accurate business licensing is foundational to a food safety program. This web-based tool is the first of its kind in the state.

Staff from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) provided information and licensing expertise, and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) staff provided the technical expertise to create the tool. By walking through the Wizard, a simple series of questions presented in plain language, users can quickly find out which license they need and the next steps for starting their new food business. The tool is available in English, Spanish, Somali, and Hmong, and is formatted to fit mobile screens to make it accessible and easy-to-use.

This project aligns with the missions and priorities of:

- Governor Mark Dayton: Better government for a better Minnesota
- The Minnesota Department of Agriculture: Enhancing Minnesotans' quality of life by ensuring the integrity of Minnesota's food supply, the health of our environment, and the strength of the state's agricultural economy.
- Minnesota IT Services: Partnering with Minnesota agencies to transform how government provides services for the people of Minnesota, bringing together the business of state government and the complexity of technology with solutions that benefit all Minnesotans.

EXEMPLAR

This Wizard is an innovative solution to help Minnesotans navigate laws and get key information about starting a food business before their first meeting with an inspector to open their business. We based the development on the intended users – citizens who wanted to license their new food business.

The Wizard uses responsive design and is accessible from any computer or mobile device connected to the Internet. The tool provides information in four common languages in Minnesota, and includes audio functionality to supplement the text.

This innovation provides a greater service to Minnesotans and saves resources. Historically, inspectors fielded these entrepreneurial inquiries in between conducting inspections. This meant delays, playing phone tag, and frustrations all around. This web-based tool is the first of its kind in the state.

The greatest part of the tool is its simplicity, and that it's based around a simple conversation with the people who have questions about food and food business licensing. This question-based tool was inspired by tools like TurboTax: taking what can be complicated laws and regulations and transforming them into simple questions. This is a framework that any state agency could apply in the future.

This is the only food licensing application at the state level that provides information in four languages: English, Hmong, Spanish, and Somali. This is a major milestone within Minnesota's diversity and inclusion efforts.

CONCEPT

Food businesses are a popular entry point for entrepreneurs, especially for new Minnesota citizens, and roughly 15 percent of Minnesota's population have a primary language other than English. MDA has been struggling to meet the demand for educating these entrepreneurs and getting them pointed in the right direction, and those challenges are compounded when there is a language barrier.

Licensing in general – and food business licensing in particular – is a very complex topic that defies easy answers. Types of food, predominance of business, how and where the food will be made and sold all change what type of license someone needs and from which agency they obtain it. MNIT staff were invaluable in crafting an easy-to-use app from the maze of licensing laws and regulations.

This tool cuts through the complexity and makes it easy for entrepreneurs to navigate the rules and regulations they must follow to safely make and sell food. Accurate business licensing is foundational to a food safety program.

The Wizard project team worked with local community groups in the target audience to promote the tool. For example, the African Development Center hosts entrepreneurship classes for Minnesotans who have recently emigrated from African countries. They use the tool in their classes to help those interested in starting a food business. This application has helped the Department of Agriculture to forge

key relationships with leaders in the Hmong, Latino, and Somali/African communities and to lay groundwork for future projects that serve these communities.

MDA has partnered this web-based tool with a new Licensing Liaison staff position. Together, the tool and the liaison can get more people ready for that first licensing inspection much more quickly and easily. This saves time for the entrepreneurs and inspectors.

METRICS

Meaningful analytics are not yet available. Now that the Wizard has been operationalized as part of on ongoing program, the teams are tracking site visits and call volume. MDA and MNIT are beginning to see metrics of reduction in call volume, tracking redirects to the online licensing application, and getting responses from customer surveys.

SIGNIFICANCE

This was a collaborative effort to fulfill a business need of providing information in a simple, easy to access, understandable format. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) provided information and licensing expertise, and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) staff provided the technical expertise to create the tool.

This project aligns with the missions and priorities of:

- Governor Mark Dayton: Better government for a better Minnesota
- The Minnesota Department of Agriculture: Enhancing Minnesotans' quality of life by ensuring the integrity of the state's food supply, the health of our environment, and the strength of Minnesota's agricultural economy.
- Minnesota IT Services: Partnering with Minnesota agencies to transform how government provides services for the people of Minnesota, bringing together the business of state government and the complexity of technology with solutions that benefit all Minnesotans.

This tool can be easily expanded and repeated. Web-based applications will only grow in popularity and utility for Minnesotans. We have plans to expand the type of information provided and will collaborate with other agencies involved in food business licensing (Department of Health, Department of Labor and Industry, etc.).

IMPACT

The benefits are simple—less frustration, clear information, and transparent processes make everyone happier and more productive.

Benefits are quantitative in terms of saving staff time, but most of the benefits are qualitative in terms of the citizen, business, community, and employee experience with state government.

Before the Wizard, inspectors fielded too many phone calls to count, in between conducting inspections; this meant delays, playing phone tag, and frustrations all around, in addition to language barriers. Now, the numbers of phone inquiries has decreased significantly, and inspectors report that applicants are better prepared and more knowledgeable about the licensing process at their initial meetings. When inspectors spend less time answering questions on the phone, they can spend more time in the field, complete more inspections, and get more food business owners on their way to self-employment.

By working with local community groups in the target audience to promote the tool, MNIT's business partner is able to create connections and inroads into the communities they serve. This application has helped the Department of Agriculture to forge key relationships with leaders in the Hmong, Latino, and Somali/African communities and lay groundwork for future projects that serve these communities.

This is the only food licensing application at the state level that provides information in four languages: English, Hmong, Spanish, and Somali; this is a major milestone in diversity and inclusion, and our efforts to provide services to all Minnesotans.

This tool can be easily expanded and repeated. Web-based applications will only grow in popularity and utility for the people we serve, and we plan to expand this type of service in future collaboration with other agencies.