Fletcher Allen Health Care Sets Industry Standard With Award-Winning Sustainable Food Program

Situation

Fletcher Allen Health Care is striving to be the country’s greenest health care organization by continually looking for new ways to build on its lasting commitment to environmental responsibility. A huge step toward achieving this goal includes managing a sustainable food program that sets the health care industry standard.

Currently, more than $1.5 million of Fletcher Allen’s $3.5 million total annual food budget is spent on products made in Vermont or within a day’s drive; more than 40% of its food and beverage purchases are sustainable; and more than 90% of the beef served in its cafeterias comes from Vermont and is free of hormones and nontherapeutic antibiotics.

Taking “Sustainable” to Heart—and to the Community

The word sustainable has a very personal meaning for Diane Imrie, director of nutrition services—one that is at the heart of what health care is all about. “To me, sustainable means doing no harm throughout the nutrition process,” she says. “Sustainable food does no harm to the people who grow it or to the people who eat it. The packaging has a minimal impact on the environment as well.”

Imrie explains how relying on locally grown food ensures that area farmers are more financially secure, thereby ideally enabling them to sustain better health. “The same is true for the surrounding community. If we’re able to put more financing into our community, it makes it a more vibrant place to live and work,” she says.

Fletcher Allen’s official sustainable food program began in 2006; the organization was one of the first to sign the “Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge.” Developed by Health Care Without Harm—an international coalition of more than 430 organizations working to transform the health care industry—the pledge is a commitment to improve the health of patients, customers, and the community by providing fresh, local, and sustainable food. That commitment led Fletcher Allen to implement a variety of sustainable food program initiatives. Fried foods are no longer offered, and patients and visitors now enjoy nutritionally dense, minimally processed foods, including a variety of locally produced fruits, vegetables, and meats. Some of the produce is grown on site by the Nutrition Services department.

Fletcher Allen maintains 3 gardens, including a healing garden—visible from the Cancer Center—that provides fresh herbs and vegetables, as well as a rooftop...
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In addition, Imrie used a portion of the grant to develop the Center for Nutrition and Healthy Food Systems, an online community and information-sharing Web site that includes more than 150 members, such as physicians and dietitians. “We share information such as upcoming events, articles that might be helpful, and press coverage that organizations have received,” says Imrie.

Imrie says that exploring all avenues and taking advantage of every opportunity are crucial for success. “For example, we were looking for yogurt that is rBST-free (rBST is a dairy growth hormone), and I communicated to our UHC representative that this was something very important to us,” says Imrie. “When the next set of UHC/Novation contracts came out, I was pleased to see a new offering that met that requirement. It’s important to clearly communicate our product needs because if we don’t, the market won’t change.”

Achieving Resounding Success From All Perspectives

Although measuring success with such a program is not easy, it is clear that Fletcher Allen has already proven it can achieve—and sustain—real change that positively affects both patients and the environment. Fletcher Allen’s sustainable food program was recently recognized by Health Care Without Harm with first-place awards in 2 categories: sustainable food procurement and public policy/advocacy, both of which highlight Fletcher Allen’s significant achievements and leadership in improving food service in health care.

The health system is currently below the 50th percentile nationally for food costs and decreased its solid waste from 1,507 tons in 2007 to 1,292 tons in 2011. Recycling has increased dramatically; 1,050 tons were recycled in 2011 compared with 438 tons in 2007, and infectious waste was reduced by 4.96 tons in 2011.

Imrie’s personal definition of success is a bit simpler. “It’s just the right thing to do,” she says. “And best of all, it feels good.”

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Diane Imrie, Director of Nutrition Services
Fletcher Allen Health Care

To learn more about Fletcher Allen’s environmental leadership efforts, visit www.fletcherallen.org/about/environmental_leadership. For more information about UHC member sustainability programs, contact Doug Smith, PharmD, senior director, Capital Resource Program and Supply Chain Services, at (312) 775-4331 or smith@uhc.edu