

St. John's Riverside finds home for unused medical supplies, equipment

On a hot and steamy New York afternoon in late July 2008, a 20-foot shipping container left a Yonkers warehouse loading dock filled to the rim with medical supplies and used hospital equipment such as exam tables, IV poles, walkers, canes and a dialysis machine. The container was bound for the tiny African island nation of Cape Verde, where no technology exists to sustain people with kidney disease and a Cape Verde physician just fresh from learning advanced dialysis protocols awaited anxiously.



A worker prepares donated items for shipment. In 2007 alone, St. John's Riverside donated more than 25 tons of items such as furniture, medical equipment and supplies.

Just a month earlier, a 40-foot-long container bound for Sierra Leone left the same warehouse filled with items such as operating room tables, IV poles, vital sign monitors, a medical refrigerator, centrifuge, computers, hundreds of medical textbooks, adult mannequins, and hundreds of boxes of consumable supplies. In the previous two months, containers bound for Malawi and Haiti left filled with stretchers, crank beds, mattresses, wheelchairs, canes, walkers, primary care supplies, IV bags, sutures, medical ware, patient gowns, scrubs, lab coats, linens, office supplies, desks, chairs, an X-Ray and ultrasound machine, EKG, suture kits, gauze, and surgical tools.

Many of the items in those containers came from New York hospitals such as Premier member St. John's Riverside, a 407-bed community hospital located on the banks of the Hudson River and part of Riverside Health Care System. The charitable effort is managed by the AFYA Foundation, a Yonkers-based worldwide organization that partners with a network of donor hospitals, health organizations, corporations, and individual households to collect medical and non-medical supplies and equipment. AFYA (the Swahili term for "good health") stores and sorts donations from its Yonkers, NY, warehouse and then loads containers bound for health clinics in Africa and the Caribbean.

Years ago, many of the items in those containers may have ended up in landfills or incinerators. But today, hospitals are finding a willing and appreciative home for those items while doing their part to become better environmental stewards at the same time.

“AFYA has done wonderful work by warehousing and shipping things that would otherwise be thrown out as trash,” said Kathy Smith-Bernier, St. John’s director of environmental services. “The countries this organization serve have such a profound need for things many of us here think of us as trash. It’s really changed my entire perspective on what really constitutes true waste here.”



Riverside Health System co-sponsored a Wheelchair Rescue Day last February. AFYA founder Danielle Butin (above) received 20 old wheelchairs from St. John's Andrus Pavilion and Park Care Pavilion sites.

It also changed the perspective of the entire Riverside Health System, which co-sponsored a Wheelchair Rescue Day last February. “[AFYA founder] Danielle Butin called me a couple days before the event and said they needed some wheelchairs,” Smith-Bernier said. “I was able to locate 20 old wheelchairs from our Andrus Pavilion and Park Care Pavilion sites. Those wheelchairs had been sitting in a back room for years.”

For the event, AFYA recruited 20 occupational therapy students from Columbia University to volunteer in a daylong wheelchair rescue and repair effort. Led by Occupational Therapy faculty members, including the department chair, the students engaged in an intensive hands-on workshop in wheelchair and positioning chair repair. Columbia faculty reviewed each piece of equipment for safety, then placed sticky notes outlining the repairs required to guide each group of students. The chairs were later shipped to Haiti.

An embarrassment of riches

In 2007 alone, St. John’s Riverside donated more than 25 tons of furniture, medical equipment and supplies – even toner cartridges – to charitable organizations and equipment recovery firms.

More specifically, the list has included wheelchairs, stretchers, respiratory therapy equipment, PCA pumps, Vacutainers, blood collection sets, blood gas machines, stress test machines, televisions, VCRs, furniture and desks.

For several years running, St. John’s has a demonstrated positive environmental track record.

In 2006, it recycled more than 700,000 pounds of cardboard, paper, scrap metal, PETE, glass, HDPE, tin/steel, aluminum, plastic film and grease, and safely disposed or recycled more than 7 tons of hazardous and universal wastes such as ballasts, light bulbs, batteries, computers, silver, and motor oil and more than 9 tons of construction and demolition

waste. Earlier this year, St. John's earned its second consecutive Partners for Change award from Practice Greenhealth, an honor that recognizes facilities that continuously improve and expand upon their mercury elimination, waste reduction, and pollution prevention programs.

Sourcing donations

Needless to say, AFYA's founder Danielle Butin is on Smith-Bernier's short list of places to call when it comes time to dispose of unused and outdated medical supplies or used equipment. In fact, AFYA has made such an impression on Smith-Bernier that she finds herself scouting trash receptacles, loading docks and dumpsters at the hospital, where she has rescued many items for pickup.



She also has resorted to old-fashioned word-of-mouth. "I first started getting the word out in my hospital by begging," Smith-Bernier chuckled. "I'd go snooping around everywhere and when I'd see something, I'd inquire about it. Once I was on a floor and saw four abandoned wheelchairs and it just so happened Danielle was making a pickup that day. I grabbed them and asked engineering to check them out. They had been sitting there for about a month."

Shortly after AFYA's first container left port for Haiti, Smith-Bernier got a call from Riverside's Cochran School of Nursing, which needed to dispose of several old mannequins used in anatomy classes. "Some of them were probably 20 years old or more, and one special mannequin had exposed muscle and nerves for training purposes," she said. "It was kind of funny seeing those things stacked on top of each other in this huge container, but I knew just who to call."

Those efforts have raised awareness among department heads at the hospital. Many, particularly the OR, nursing school and biomedical engineering, now have Smith-Bernier's department on speed dial.



“Now, whenever my supervisors see anything that is destined for disposal or replacement, they know to call me,” she said. “Everyone is bringing stuff to me all the time now. A lot of the stuff that comes into my department I have no idea what it is or does, but my biomed guys check everything out and tell me.”

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St. Johns Riverside Hospital

As it turned out, AFYA had a specific need for the mannequins, which were on the wish list of an African health clinic needing them to train clinicians on CPR. “I later learned that the mannequins saved the head doctor’s job,” she said.

Many items hospitals now take for granted, such as safety needles with sliding sleeves, are completely foreign to caregivers in impoverished countries like Sierra Leone and Cape Verde. “Say a hospital donates a box of unused IV starter kits. Many people in Africa don’t even know this technology exists and the danger of HIV infection is huge,” said Butin. “So one of the challenges [AFYA has] is also finding ways of exporting expertise to train these people on this kind of technology.”

As plentiful and generous as donations of medical supplies are, Butin said hospitals are now beginning to learn of the dire need her recipients have for everyday things like lab coats, chairs, desks and lamps. Butin, a former occupational therapist and managed care executive, said it wasn’t long after starting AFYA she learned this. “I knew from my background in public health that I needed a bigger net,” she said.

Safety and quality issues

AFYA, like other legally certified equipment recovery firms now operating in the United States, accepts unopened medical supplies and gently used medical equipment, as well as non-medical items like office supplies and furniture. Pharmaceuticals and expired medical supplies are not accepted, however.

Nothing broken or hazardous leaves St. John’s dock bound for AFYA. All medical equipment is tested and screen by the hospital’s biomedical engineers to ensure it

functions reliably and safely. Unopened medical supplies that come from the hospital's OR have never been in contact with a patient's surgical field, Smith-Bernier said.

For AFYA's part, all donated medical materials are sent within one month of their collection, said Butin.

Benefits: real and intangible

For Smith-Bernier, donating medical supplies and used equipment not only benefits needy third-world countries in Africa and the Caribbean, but her hospital in many ways as well.

"This has had a definite impact on our waste reduction efforts here and has saved a ton of money on our disposal costs," she said. "Our waste disposal costs are going sky-high, especially since the incredible rise in the cost of fuel. I've been asking for fuel surcharge ceilings in my new waste management contracts, but my vendors aren't very warm to that," she added.

As for the intangible benefits of finding homes for medical supplies and equipment, the rewards are very real.

"It feels great to do this," she added. "Sure, we've always sent things like this through the proper recycling channels, but if someone can benefit from using this material, all the better."

Smith-Bernier recalls a touching moment several months ago after word about AFYA spread throughout St. John's Riverside. "A nurse came down to see me with tears in her eyes and asked if I had anything I could donate. She actually had emigrated from a small African country and was looking for some old linens to send to a hospital there. A niece of hers died over there after giving birth. She said the facility did not even have linens for surgical tables.

"I told her that St. John's reuses its linens and cuts up old ones for rags, but gave her Danielle's number at AFYA." For that, Smith-Bernier received a huge hug and the nurse was able to connect with AFYA.

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