

## Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center's food recycling successes

For several years, Premier member Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center, Seattle, has reaped the fruits of its labors in patient care, earning a distinction from *U.S. News & World Report* and *Child* magazines as one of the nation's top pediatric hospitals.



But it also has realized a long-term goal of leading in other areas, including the environment, based on the premise that its environmental stewardship impacts natural resources for generations to come.

Its most recent environmental success came from a relatively unlikely source in many hospitals: the dietary department. As a result of an effort that began with a simple plan to compost organic materials destined for landfills, Children's has spawned successful programs in waste prevention and recycling, green cleaning and integrated pest management.



**Today, Children's Hospital diverts more than 1,400 pounds of food waste each week from landfills.**

Today, Children's Hospital diverts more than 1,400 pounds of food waste each week from landfills through composting, saving the hospital about 40 percent on its annual waste bill.

And by minimizing the use of garbage disposals, Children's also saves approximately \$30 per day on its water bills, as well additional energy and maintenance savings.

### **Developing a plan**

Of all the food waste produced by U.S. hospitals every year, most is either recyclable (31%) or able to be composted (32%).

A study at Children's showed the hospital's dietary waste stream was composed of the following:

- Paper – 43%.
- Plastic – 36%.
- Metal – 1%.
- Organic – 20%.

Staff soon realized that there would be significant opportunities for food composting because of the hospital's high percentage of soiled paper and organics. In addition, staff knew that the hospital could save a lot of money from not diverting the material through the more expensive general waste stream.

Before deciding on a final plan, staff faced a few challenges, none the least of which were concerns about pests and odors, the cost of special composting bags, the level of employee participation, and mixed messages about how to identify "compostable" food service products. At first glance, it seemed that the costs and resources would outweigh the benefits. There also were infectious waste perceptions to overcome and without any regional working models from which to learn from, doubts ensued.

But thanks to the efforts of hospital staff, highly cooperative and receptive local public utilities and health departments, and a successful relationship with an experienced area compost company, the doubts quickly waned.

Children's contracted with Cedar Grove Compost, which received permission from the Seattle and King County Public Health Department to begin a hospital composting program at the hospital. Because Cedar Grove wanted to ensure the quality of its resale product, the company began with a short list of what constituted acceptable products for composting, promising to regularly test for additional products. Children's investment in the effort was surprisingly modest, requiring purchases such as rubber trash cans on wheels, mixed recycle containers (for metals, plastics, etc.), biodegradable can liners and bands.

One of the more pleasant surprises came from the Seattle Public Utilities' (SPU) Resource Venture Program, which provided a wealth of training, education and support services.

The Resource Venture program provides free waste composting assistance to all Seattle-area businesses, including health care facilities. Environmental specialists from Cascadia Consulting Group are hired by SPU to recruit and assist businesses in reducing their environmental footprint. These specialists provide free consultation, strategy, financial analyses, employee training and follow-up concerning waste reduction, water conservation, storm water management, green building and climate change.

Resource Venture is known for helping food service and facilities planners address common obstacles with creative solutions. For example, the program helped one hospital

solve its limited docking space problem by finding a waste management vendor with a dumpster-free service.

### **Benefits and results**

Children's already is realizing savings of 20% to 30% from recycling efforts in the dietary department. And because garbage disposals aren't constantly running, the hospital saves a substantial amount of money on water and electricity.

The hospital also hosts a local farmer's market (now up and running two days per month) run by Full Circle Farm, a local certified organic supplier. Campus grounds staff provide a washing station for customers, and the hospital provides Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) accounts for staff. CSA generally is the practice of focusing on the production of high quality foods using ecological, organic or biodynamic farming methods.



**Children's hosts a local farmer's market run by a local certified organic supplier**

Children's also is among the growing number of hospitals that have signed on to Health Care Without Harm's Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge, which, among other things, encourages hospitals to:

- Work to increase the availability of locally sourced foods;
- Encourage vendors to supply food free of synthetic pesticides, hormones and antibiotics;
- Implement a program to adopt sustainable food procurement;
- Communicate interest in foods local and certified;
- Educate about nutritious, socially just, ecological sustainable food and healthy food practices;
- Minimize or beneficially use food waste;
- Support use of packaging and products that are ecologically protective; and
- Develop a program to support sustainable and humane agriculture systems.

Community interest is swelling because the program at Children's has been so successful. For example, University of Washington, Swedish and Northwest hospitals – as well as

area restaurants, caterers, and event facilities – are seeking Cascadia Consulting Group’s help to start similar programs.

### **Future plans**

The food program has spawned successes in other areas such as initiatives surrounding green cleaning products and equipment (the hospital already is using compact steam cleaners in kitchen areas on drains, grill areas and floors), water and energy conservation, and integrated pest management. Future plans also include working with vendors to provide a wider selection of cost effective biodegradable service ware products.

Hospitals that practice food recycling and composting can realize a host of benefits. In addition to saving money, such programs are a great staff morale builder and present a positive image in the community – things that aren’t lost on Mitch Birchfield, Environmental Services director and Hazardous Materials manager. "At Children's, we profoundly impact the lives of kids we treat everyday," he said. "As leaders, we have both the burden and the privilege to preserve our vision and legacies, and to create new legacies that promote best practices, and that genuinely address complex issues that include using renewable products, adopting sustainable practices and methods, and regularly evaluating our environmental footprint."

*Portions of this article were adapted from Stat Green, a periodic newsletter produced by Hospitals for Healthy Environment.*

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### **Steps to starting a food recycling food at your hospital**

- 1. Identify and meet with hauler.**
- 2. Notify local health department to seek permission, assure infectious and food waste are segregated; be available for questions.**
- 3. Purchase or designate existing bins.**
- 4. Solicit staff ideas, then conduct training.**
- 5. Roll out program.**
- 6. Monitor and adjust.**

***Source: Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center***