

Covenant Health Systems' plan drives healthy food choices

Realizing the value of switching to healthy food alternatives, Covenant Health Systems, a Lexington, MA-based health and elder care system, has implemented a variety of programs, from switching to organic, fair trade coffee to organic gardening.

For example, Sisters of Charity Health System, Lewiston, ME, implemented its successful “Lots to Gardens,” a youth and community-driven program that uses sustainable urban agriculture to create access to fresh food and nurture healthy children and communities.

People are taught how to grow their own food and are provided with affordable access to fresh food. The program has created 15 gardens and green spaces in four diverse neighborhoods in Lewiston. Families and senior citizens grow their own food in community gardens or in apartment side beds.

Youth and children grow food for those vulnerable to hunger in our city and experience the rewards of enjoying the food they grew. The nutrition programming includes cooking and nutrition classes that teach healthy eating habits, cooking demonstrations at the Farmers' Market, and many free recipes and nutrition information. Using the gardens as a classroom, adults and youth grow food for themselves and their own community, resulting in healthier families, fresh food on the tables of hungry people, and stronger, more just communities.

“Lots to Gardens believes that it is essential that people affected by hunger become the leaders in building sustainable food systems,” said Nancy Mulvihill, vice president, corporate communications and head of Covenant’s Environmental Committee. For example, the Resident Garden Coordinator Training program enabled four gardeners to lead their neighbors in food production, supporting the children's garden and programs, and developing a sense of pride in themselves and their neighborhood.

Four-year journey

Covenant embarked on its journey less than four years ago, setting its first system-wide goal of improving environmental stewardship. A year later, it partnered with Hospitals for a Healthy Environment (H2E), a collaborative healthcare industry effort to promote environmental sustainability. And a year later, Covenant achieved a benchmark rarely achieved by any hospital system when it earned H2E’s prestigious Champion for Change award, given to organizations that take a leadership role in improving environmental performance in healthcare. Only 20 organizations

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Nancy Mulvihill

The logo for Covenant Health Systems, consisting of the words "COVENANT", "HEALTH", and "SYSTEMS" stacked vertically in a bold, black, sans-serif font, centered within a yellow rectangular background.

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nationwide earned the honor this year.

Covenant repeated that success in 2006, when it earned its second “Champion” award. Today, all of its member hospitals and skilled nursing facilities are active H2E partners, and are notching significant progress in practically every area of environmental stewardship – from recycling and waste reduction, toxic chemical and mercury reduction/elimination, to energy efficiency and environmentally preferable purchasing (EPP).

“Covenant is at the forefront of a fundamental shift in the healthcare industry,” said H2E Executive Director Laura Brannen. “By introducing healthier and more responsible products and practices, Covenant is helping healthcare facilities everywhere to operate in ways that protect the health of patients, workers, communities, and the environment. This is a revolution that benefits everyone.”

“The most exciting thing about earning the award was that *all* of our members participated in the effort, something that signifies their culture change,” said Mulvihill. “Accepting the challenge to be a Champion helped us move our facilities and communities forward in new areas of thoughtful action and accomplishment.”

For the complete story about Covenant Health Systems’ environmental success, see [“Covenant Health Systems on environmental stewardship fast track”](#) on the Premier Safety Institute Green Corner Web site.

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