

Compacting waste at Western Maryland Health System nets big savings and healthier environment

Western Maryland Health System had a problem with paying to dispose of regulated medical waste it didn't even generate.

It's a common practice for medical waste haulers to charge for minimum poundage. But the system was alarmed when, after studying the entire collection and disposal process with housekeeping staff and the system's waste hauler, it discovered that as much as 23 percent of its total regulated medical waste disposal costs represented phantom weight, or the difference between actual weight and the hauler's minimum charge. That difference was a staggering \$33,000 in fiscal year 2005 alone.

"Our medical waste is collected in large 94-gallon lockable carts and our vendor assigns a minimum weight and cost to each bin of 125 pounds," said Patrick J. Cassese, System Director, Housekeeping Department, for the two-hospital system based in Cumberland. "Therefore, if a cart weighs 95 pounds, there's 30 pounds of phantom weight in that cart."

The epiphany prompted Cassese and his team to review best practices in the industry. After thoroughly reviewing the literature and talking with peers, Cassese discovered that the system could use small compactors specially designed for the lockable waste carts, the premise being that compressing the waste as much as possible would reduce the phantom weight in each container.

"These compactors would allow us to continue our current collection process with no impact to the housekeeping staff," said Cassese. In May 2005, the system purchased two compactors and installed one each at Memorial Hospital and Medical Center of Cumberland and Sacred Heart Hospital Campus.

To recover the \$27,000 cost of the compactors within a year, Cassese calculated that the hospital system would need to reduce the existing phantom weight to 5 percent or less, representing a total expense reduction of \$100,000 over five years. With that initial goal in place, the system implemented the new plan.

As it turns out, those projections were more than conservative, and the results were quickly a pleasant surprise.

Within the first month of implementing the new compactors, the system's phantom weight had been reduced from 23 percent to 14 percent. A month later, the system came close to reaching its initial goal of reducing phantom weight to 5 percent. "By this time, the housekeeping staff had become more familiar with the new compactors and the new process," Cassese said.

But to the hospital system's surprise, the overall phantom weight *continued* to decline each month and by September, just four months after implementation, phantom weight

had dropped to just 1 percent. Cassese then raised the bar, setting a new phantom weight goal of 1.5 percent or less.

By the end of the system's fiscal year in June 2006, the phantom weight had dropped to a paltry .17 percent, cutting the hospital system's regulated medical waste disposal costs by more than \$24,000 in one year. Cassese projects that the new system will save the system approximately \$103,000 over the next five years, even after recouping the initial investment in the two compactors.

All told, the plan that began as an effort to avoid paying for "phantom" waste disposal ended up saving Western Maryland \$50,000 a year, as well as saving the environment by diverting more than 6 tons of plastic from landfills.

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