



## Covenant Health Systems on environmental stewardship fast track

Many hospitals today approach environmental efforts in piecemeal fashion, building on small successes as they come. In time, the organizational mindset slowly transforms.

If changing the culture of one facility to think and act environmentally responsible seems daunting, the challenges are only magnified for large hospital systems.



But Covenant Health Systems, a Lexington, MA-based health and elder care system, overcame those challenges in a remarkably short period of time. 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 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 Nancy Mulvihill, vice president, corporate communications and head of Covenant's Environmental Committee. "Accepting the challenge to be a Champion helped us move our facilities and communities forward in new areas of thoughtful action and accomplishment."

### Commitment begins at the top

Mulvihill said a large part of Covenant's success is due to the buy-in from our President and CEO, David Lincoln as well as our senior management group. "When the system headquarters mandates that this work be done, it inspires facilities to fulfill the goals,"



she said. “This is clearly an important initiative and one that makes sense for all of us in healthcare. It is gratifying to see the changes and enthusiasm in our facilities.”

In relatively short order, Covenant facilities implemented environmentally preferable purchasing policies, quite an accomplishment since most started from scratch, Mulvihill said.

Covenant also works closely with Premier and Yankee Alliance, its group purchasing partners, in achieving its EPP goals and “improving its purchasing decisions,” she added. In addition, “green teams” are in place within all of our member facilities.

Covenant’s system-wide Environmental Committee, comprised of representatives from hospitals, skilled nursing facilities and assisted living residences, helps steer the system in attaining EPP goals. The work of the committee includes steering facilities to reach important goals such as becoming mercury-free, communicating opportunities such as recycling projects, sharing used equipment (instead of purchasing new), engaging vendors and disseminating tools and sample policies.

“Our corporate staff frequently visit member facilities to learn from them about their environmental practices and share what others are doing,” Mulvihill said. “Meetings are periodically held at various member sites to learn from our hospital experts about environmentally friendly flooring, laundry and more. Our presence is key because it shows our commitment.”

### **Major initiatives**

Here’s a look at some of Covenant’s major environmental initiatives, and the progress it’s made:

- *Mercury elimination* – In early 2005, Covenant’s Strategic Action Plan mandated a system-wide mercury reduction policy for members. By November of that year, each member facility had virtually eliminated mercury. Covenant members St. Joseph Hospital, Nashua, NH, Maristhill Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, Waltham, MA, and St. Joseph Manor, Brockton, MA, earned the H2E “Making Mercury Free” award in 2007. Covenant members Sisters of Charity Health System, Lewiston, ME, Youville Hospital, Cambridge, MA, and St. Mary Health Care Center, Worcester, MA, earned the award in previous years. Today, the system continues to work closely with its GPOs to ensure that all of its products are mercury free and environmentally friendly, Mulvihill said.
- *Waste reduction* – Today, every Covenant member now has a system in place to track and measure waste streams, as well as processes for waste reduction, Mulvihill said. In 2005, Covenant implemented corporate and member-level recycling programs for items such as paper, fluorescent lights, paper, cardboard, cans, cartridges, computers and batteries. One facility – St. Joseph Hospital – has recycled over 151 tons of paper and 109 tons of cardboard the past three years. In addition, members coordinate the donation of their used equipment (such as furniture, beds and televisions) to other

members or, when appropriate, to local and international charities such as Por Cristo, an Archdiocesan group that arranges transport of usable equipment to hospitals in developing countries. For example, Youville Hospital & Rehabilitation Center, Cambridge, MA, has donated more than \$100,000 worth of hospital equipment through Por Cristo. Some recycling efforts have been quite creative. For example, one facility contracted with a local pig farmer to collect leftover food for his animals. St. Joseph Manor (Brockton) instituted a drop off site for the “Cell Phones for Soldiers” program, gathering and shipping mobile phones to soldiers serving in Iraq. Other initiatives include switching to silverware instead of plastic and reusable cups instead of Styrofoam.

- *Healthy food* – Realizing the value of switching to healthy food alternatives, Covenant has implemented a variety of programs, from switching to organic, fair trade coffee to organic gardening. For example, Sisters of Charity Health System 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,” Mulvihill said. 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.
- *Energy efficiencies* – Initiatives have included converting standard incandescent and fluorescent bulbs to energy efficient versions. One facility – Youville Hospital – is exploring the installation of solar panels.
- *Toxic substance minimization* – Covenant is currently working with Premier to identify environmentally friendly building materials, cleaning products and energy efficient laundry systems.

### **Promoting awareness**

Covenant has been zealous in getting the word out about its environmental stewardship not only with their 6,000-plus employees, but the communities served by their members. The annual Earth Day celebration, for example, has provided some unique opportunities.



On that day, all Covenant facilities fly the Earth Day flag. Corporate offices distributed free energy efficient light bulbs and placed an environmental stewardship suggestion box. Individually:

- Youville Hospital used the money it saved from switching to reusable cups to plant a tree.
- Sisters of Charity Health System placed banners around campus "hot spots" acknowledging Earth Day and included an article in the employee newsletter encouraging staff to "go green."
- St. Mary Health Care Center constructed a planting bed outside high enough for residents to reach (and plant) from their wheelchairs.
- D'Youville Senior Care, Lowell, MA, posted a display with information about current toxins, green building, sustainable building, recycling and the benefits of going green.
- St. Joseph Manor disseminated information to associates, residents and family members about recycling, energy saving tips, decomposition rates for trash and a water loss table.
- Mont Marie Health Care Center, Holyoke, MA, hosted a small Earth Day booth highlighted energy conservation and distributed free CFL light bulbs to the public.

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