

HEALTHY FOOD IN HEALTHCARE

Fairview, a Critical Access Hospital in Western Massachusetts, interprets its mission of promoting a healthier community very broadly. Our Room Service initiative, aimed at improving patient satisfaction, naturally evolved into promoting healthier eating for patients and staff. Our rural Berkshire surroundings, with strong organic agricultural resources, facilitated our hospital's food services initiatives around food production and procurement.

After reading an article sent to us by our CEO in October of 2006, our Food Services Department began its fact-finding mission. This included a "Webinar", two conferences and site visits. In January 2007, Fairview was the first hospital in Massachusetts to sign "The Healthy Food in Healthcare" pledge. The dietitian and the Director of Nutrition and Food services developed a strategy for bringing in healthier food choices. This meant assessing our current vendors and their products, researching more appropriate vendors and altering our recipes and menus. The research led us to seek out and network with local farmers who could share in our vision of providing healthier foods.

Networking with Berkshire Grown, a local (Farm-to-Table business program), visiting local farmers to inspect their growing and sanitation conditions, and sending out letters outlining our new expectations to vendors, were all strategies we used in our external community. The shared vision became one of building an alternative food system that is deeply rooted in the concept of supporting local producers and vendors.

Internally, we filtered out trans fats from our recipes, eliminated the deep fryer completely, incorporated more whole grains and provided nutritional facts on our menu items. Buying more seasonal, locally-grown produce and eliminating vendors whose products contained hormones, pesticides and antibiotics, further supported this strategy. Hospital employees have sponsored an on-site vegetable garden. In addition to providing healthier choices, we began to charge more for unhealthy items, such as sodas.

One year ago, our entire health system embarked on a "Wellness at Work" program. The healthier foods initiative became a critical part of this larger concept. Creative thinking was required to integrate the two. Wellness at Work included such innovative programs as the "Walk with Me," "Yoga at Work," discounts for memberships at local gyms, Weight Watcher groups, a food show of healthy foods available from our vendors and a "Purchase 10 pieces of fruit and the next one is free" program. All of these are examples of the efforts being made to hardwire this culture change.

To cultivate these new external relationships, we have collaborated with a local high school, who will grow and sell us herbs for cooking. Beginning this June, we have implemented a farmer's market, showcasing one local farmer a week, who will sell their produce in the hospital. We have initiated a barter system with a local grower for compost, in exchange for reduced prices on fresh vegetables. Recycling, plus the composting has significantly reduced our waste. This new healthy way, even with the necessary increase in workload, has been well accepted by the Food Services staff. Resistance from all our hospital staff has been minimal. Education has been devised for staff and patients about the relationship between health and how our food is produced and distributed. We believe that we have modeled strong leadership for healthy communities and ecosystems.