

## **CHW hospitals take healthy food goals to high levels**

Premier owner Catholic Healthcare West (CHW) developed its own “Food and Nutrition Vision Statement” in 2005, nine years after becoming a signatory to the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES), a national network of investors, environmental organizations and other public interest groups working with companies and investors to address sustainability challenges such as global climate change.

Since that time, CHW and its 41 hospitals have shown creative ways to be proactive and address the many issues that relate to the environmental and social issues around food supplies.

The comprehensive vision statement calls for CHW to:

- Develop policies, procedures, supply contracts and education for staff, patients, and suppliers.
- Communicate and model healthy food choices and programs within CHW hospitals and in local and national communities.
- Promote and source from producers and processors that uphold the dignity of family, farmers, workers and their communities and support sustainable and humane agriculture systems.
- Encourage labeling that tells where a food is from and how it was produced.
- Maximize locally sourced foods, free of unnecessary hormones, pesticides, antibiotics and protective of biodiversity.
- Promote sustainable food transportation systems and source, when appropriate, local foods and those which minimize transportation impacts.
- Ensure that food waste is minimized and beneficially reused, and support the use of environmentally friendly food packaging and products.

“Ceres was founded after the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989,” said Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, CHW Ecology program coordinator. “After deciding to work together as a system on ecological issues, CHW signed on to Ceres. Supply chain management really jumped head-on into this and have been proactive in translating our mission and values into environmentally sound business practices. We were the only healthcare system at the time to start measuring and monitoring such things as waste generation, water conservation and recycling.”

Since putting its food vision statement into practice, CHW has implemented broad, sweeping environmental changes in the way it procures food, and works with food suppliers and distributors. For example, CHW was one of the first large healthcare systems to introduce Fair Trade coffee, produced through an international program that promotes ethical labor, commerce, and environmental practices. CHW also was the first health system to sign the Healthy Food Pledge, a program developed by Health Care Without Harm to commit organizations to sound environmental food practices.

“Our food vision statement began as a list of things we wanted to commit to, and we started with the ‘low-hanging fruit’ such as ensuring milk had no recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) and poultry were antibiotic-free,” said Sister Leciejewski. “We also looked at other things like organic vegetables and getting away from pesticides and genetically modified produce.”

Each of CHW’s hospitals has an ecology contact person who coordinates the activities of a hospital environmental action committee composed of various staff members such as nurses, engineers, environmental services and safety personnel. Sister Leciejewski and her coordinators communicate regularly to share ideas and ensure system goals are on track.

Today, many CHW hospitals have become models for successful sustainable food-system approaches. Here’s a story of just one of them – Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz, CA.

### **A ‘field of dreams’**

Dominican Hospital began with a small plot of hard clay topped by sandy soil – hardly a hospitable place to grow fruits and vegetables.

That humble piece of land has become a field of dreams for the northern California hospital, yielding crops of fresh food, when in season, for the hospital’s cafeteria and attracting health-conscious community residents and a group of dedicated, ecologically-minded volunteers.

In keeping with one of its visions to maximize locally sourced, pesticide-free foods, Dominican Hospital today operates the flourishing on-campus 3,800 square-foot organic garden. Recently, a local resident donated a 8 ½-by-16-foot greenhouse to supplement the garden, Leciejewski said.



Michael Raciti, Dominican Hospital Garden Project Manager, is harvesting lettuce that will be taken to the hospital cafeteria at Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz, California. *Photo courtesy of Dominican Hospital.*

The hospital also has a constant, reliable source of locally grown organic food thanks to an agreement with the Agriculture and Land Based Training Association of Salinas Valley (ALBA Farms), a non-profit organization that operates a minority-run organic

farm. Because of its daily food needs, the hospital is able to request specific crops, which cost the hospital less than market prices for comparable organic produce. The fresh produce means less waste (because it has higher shelf life) and less pollution (from not having food trucked to the facility from remote locations).

Since the garden opened, Dominican has realized a host of benefits. Not only is it able to provide fresh, healthy produce in season for the hospital, but the program also has imbued a sense of pride among staff and garden volunteers and brought the hospital and its community closer over a common goal of recognizing our connectedness to Earth and one another.

*(Portions of this article were adapted from Hospitals for a Healthy Environment's "Stat Green" newsletter, Volume 2, Issue 4. April 2005.)*

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