

Best Practices

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Sustainable nutrition

A hospital makes food a care-quality imperative



Four years ago, our facility, New Milford (Conn.) Hospital, decided to make food service a top priority. Faced with low Press Ganey scores for our inpatient food service (30th percentile nationally), major complaints from employees, a demoralized food service staff and rapidly escalating rates of obesity in the communities we serve, we knew we had to change. Together with local pediatrician Diane D'Isidori, MD, and local chef Anne Gallagher, we created a multi-faceted initiative called Plow to Plate® that is supported by a community coalition and engages a host of community-based organizations and health care professionals in a collaborative effort to develop a sustainable food system and healthy food culture for our region.

We took a different tack than other hospitals by turning our food service into a tool to help prevent disease and improve public health. Our hospital is committed to the philosophy that a healthful diet is essential to well-being and that a community hospital should take the lead by setting an example to those it serves. The effort is not unusual for New Milford, licensed for 85 beds and serving communities in southern Litchfield and Northern Fairfield Counties in Connecticut, as well as Dutchess County in New York State. We have successfully implemented many performance improvement initiatives, and our hospital is an affiliate of Planetree, an organization that promotes patient-centered care in healing environments.



Graduates of a food-learning program for middle and high school students in New Milford.

(New Milford recently entered an affiliation with Danbury Hospital, also a Planetree affiliate, as a part of Western Connecticut Healthcare.)

To begin, our hospital joined the international coalition Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) in early 2007. Its members work to create ecologically sound and healthy alternatives to health care practices that pollute the environment and contribute to disease. We took HCWH's "Healthy Food in Health Care" pledge, and it is placed at the entry to our cafeteria for all to see. A few months later, Sustainable Food Systems, a consulting firm located in

Wallingford, Conn., which specializes in sustainable food practices for institutions, was retained to conduct a rigorous assessment of our food service and to make recommendations for improvement.

This work led to our decision to issue a request for proposals expressing the hospital's philosophy that healthful, sustainable food systems and services are a component of health care practice and containing specific requirements we deemed essential to fulfilling that vision. Unidine Corp. — known for its commitment to fresh food, culinary expertise and a "green" approach

to food service management — was selected to deliver a fully integrated food service program that aligned with the hospital's philosophy and objectives. While retaining the hospital's dining services staff, Unidine added the skills of one of the co-authors of this article, Culinary Institute of America-trained Chef Kerry Gold, as well as Executive Chef Eric Woytowich. Unidine's expertise facilitated a swift and efficient transition that satisfied the hospital's aggressive timeline.

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local ingredients whenever possible, the elimination of high-fructose corn syrup, healthy food preparation (no deep frying) and involvement in the hospital’s community-based Plow to Plate programs. Six local farms and a dairy cooperative provide ingredients and products to the chefs. Intensive staff training, renovation of the kitchen space to facilitate fresh food preparation and room service, new uniforms with the Plow to Plate logo, and new marketing and educational materials, such as the in-depth *Patient Guide to Dining Services* which explains the local sources of ingredients and their nutritional value, engender respect for the department

and pride in the food service staff. Soon, residents of New Milford — including Mayor Patricia Murphy — were regulars for lunch.

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outside the back door to the kitchen. Produce from the garden is used in our wide variety of soups, all of which are made from scratch, our butternut squash risotto, lavender scones and Tulsi tea — to name just a few dishes that the garden supports. The most recently added program, Senior Suppers, provides dinner at a discounted price for community residents over the age of 65, with social activities such as music and informal discussions with physicians, dietitians and integrative medicine providers often following supper. The program’s popularity has led to two seatings and a dedicated reservation line.

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The Press Ganey survey was used to measure performance improvement for the inpatient dining program. The hospital’s comprehensive approach to monitoring and measuring the program includes a commitment to consistent meal rounds by Guest Services representatives and managers, inspection of test trays to ensure quality and

accuracy, and analysis of Press Ganey survey results. Staff members participate in regular review of Press Ganey scores and quickly respond to any concerns with action plans, such as special scripts to improve communication with patients and nursing staff, to correct any deficiencies and use quality improvement indicators to measure the results.

In the intensive care unit, for example, patient surveys revealed dissatisfaction with food temperature. When investigated, the dining services manager learned that the nurses were too busy with the complex medical tasks at hand and could not get the food to the patient immediately after it is delivered by Dining Services. After discussion and explanation of the skills of the newly trained staff, the nursing team and dining manager agreed to transform ICU meal delivery to the room-service style used in all other departments, with nutritional assistants serving patients and assisting with any barriers to feeding that a patient might be experiencing. Thus, a collaborative practice was created, and scores quickly improved. Patients and staff members alike were impressed.





Executive Chef Eric Woytowich (left) and Chef Kerry Gold have collaborated on award-winning, nutritious cuisine.

Chef Gold's utilization of the Press Ganey measurement system is now a model for other departments, and he serves as a mentor for managers as they implement their own performance improvement strategies to reach the overall hospital goal of ranking in the 90th percentile. New Milford Hospital's dining services exceeded that goal with their Press Ganey percentile ranking now in the high nineties. The hospital received the 2009 Spirit of Planetree Award in the "Nutritional and Nurturing Aspects of Food" category and the Glynwood Center (New York) Harvest Award for "Good Food for Health" in 2010.

Most importantly, the hospital's leadership has set an example not just regionally, but nationally, and is changing attitudes and practices. The major changes now occurring in health care service delivery will necessitate more attention to "self-care" and prevention; hospitals have both an opportunity and a duty to assist the public on the most fundamental of all modalities for health: the food we eat. **PG**



To learn more about Plow to Plate®, go online to plowtoplate.org.