

Case Study: Healthier Food Challenge: Sustainable, Local and Organic Food Purchasing



Summary

With its position in the community, 4,400 employees, and over 2 million meals prepared per year, Palomar Health has a significant opportunity to make a positive impact on human health and the environment by serving more sustainable, local, and organic produce.

Palomar Health

Benefits

- Increased purchasing of sustainable, local, and organic (SLO) produce by up to 60 percent in two hospitals and one site saw a 38 percent increase in sales in the third quarter in fiscal year 2014.
- 18 percent increase in cafeteria revenues in January 2015 of FY2014-FY2015, with an additional 19 percent increase over budgeted as of January 2015 in FY2015.
- Improved Press Ganey scores; Villa Pomerado, a skilled nursing facility attached to Pomerado Hospital, increased from the 75th to almost 90th percentile.
- Success with produce has inspired an expanded emphasis on SLO foods; 13 percent of total food purchasing is now sustainable, local, and organic.

Build a Healthier Food System

Integrating SLO produce into hospital food service using seasonal and plant-based menus has numerous positive outcomes around health, chemicals, communities, and the environment. The purchase of organically produced foods lowers exposure to toxic pesticides for vulnerable populations like farm workers and patients. Supporting locally-owned farms reinforces the economic well-being of producers and communities. Increasing consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables improves overall health and contributes to healthy weight maintenance.

Foster Leadership

Palomar's sustainability efforts have benefited enormously from the creation of a sustainability manager position in 2008. The manager coordinates teams, ensures follow-through on targeted goals, and addresses sustainability from a holistic perspective across departments.

Create a Healthy Food Council

The SLO food team effort was initially led by the sustainability manager and the Food Services Director using resources from Health Care Without Harm and the Healthier Hospitals Initiative. To expand the effort, an executive-supported Healthy Food Council was created comprised of leaders in food service, sustainability, wellness, clinical nutrition, and human resources.

About Palomar Health

Palomar Health is an 800-bed, three-hospital health system located in north San Diego County. Palomar Health is the first and only California member of the Mayo Clinic Care Network, the largest public health-care district by area in California, and the most comprehensive health care delivery system in northern San Diego County. It is governed by a publicly-elected board of directors, and its primary service area in San Diego County has more than 500,000 residents. Palomar Health provides medical services in virtually all fields of medicine, including primary care, cardiovascular care, emergency services, trauma, cancer, orthopedics, women's health, rehabilitation, as well as robotic and bariatric surgery.

Engage Executive Support

A formal commitment of executive support and a sustainable food and beverage policy (currently under development) will ensure the success of the program throughout any changes in management. The Healthy Food Council provides quarterly updates to the executive team via the Executive Balanced Scorecard.

Leverage the Supply Chain

The sustainability manager and food services director educated Palomar's produce distributor about the health system's goal to increase SLO purchasing. As a regional vendor with existing farmer relationships, the distributor was able to expand connections with local farmers while achieving competitive pricing and ensuring on-time delivery. Palomar requested information about farm identification, location, and sustainable or organic farming methods on purchasing guides and requested quarterly reports. The food service team selected cost neutral hot buys identified by the distributor, meaning seasonal or bumper crops available in large quantities at a reasonable price. The team looked for ways to offset additional costs when they occurred by reducing costs in other areas, such as meat procurement.

Educate the Food Service Team

The Sustainability Manager, along with food service managers, supervisors, and the director, engaged the entire food service staff throughout the process. This radically improved success. Sharing sales data and information about how the hospital is helping to build a healthier food system gave the food service staff a sense of pride in the work and inspired them to promote SLO food options. Providing tastings for staff, patient tray lines and in the café also helped to build excitement.

Prioritize Marketing

Marketing the transition to local and sustainable offerings is critical to programmatic momentum and success. At one location where the food service team rolled out a healthier alternative through tastings and marketing, there were lines out the door and customers demanded more of the new product. At another campus where the team did not go the extra mile, there was no continued interest and the new product was taken off the menu. A variety of avenues are used to market healthy food programs—signage in cafés and on patient trays, in newsletters, flyers on the units, the intranet, external publications, through industry groups, and in regional and national presentations. A multi-pronged marketing strategy ensures clear messaging around the health and sustainability goals of the initiative.

The Team

Barbara Hamilton, Sustainability Manager

Jim Metzger, Director of Hospitality Services

Javier Guerrero, Food and Nutrition Manager, Palomar Medical Center

Sheradon Kalani Smith, Food and Nutrition Manager, Palomar Medical Center

Kelly York, Food and Nutrition Manager, Palomar Health Downtown Campus

Margaret Mertens, RD Clinical Nutrition Manager

Todd Nadeau, Wellness Coordinator

Zohra Fahim, Clinical Pathmaker Intern

Shari Hogle, Director of Benefits and HR Information Services

Khristina Teope, Food and Nutrition Manager, Pomerado Hospital

Jennell Bussell, Operations Support Assistant



Collaborate with Other Health Systems

Palomar Health is part of a coalition of 19 hospitals in the San Diego County Nutrition in Healthcare Leadership Team (NHLT), which are committed to implementing the HHI Healthier Food Challenge with support from San Diego Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP) and Health Care Without Harm. The participating hospitals share best practices and combine purchasing power to help transform the marketplace and to increase the availability of sustainable foods.