



# Sustainable Food Purchasing in Hospitals

## CASE STUDIES

Due to their substantial purchasing power and their mission-driven interest in preventing disease, healthcare institutions have an important role to play in helping to create a healthier food system. Hospitals can model sustainable procurement and healthier food choices and can provide an ideal setting to inform the communities they serve about the connections between food, health, and the environment. Several experts have noted supporting sustainable food practices can protect local ecologies, support local economies and promote healthier food choices.

However, hospital food supply chains are complex, and implementing sustainable food procurement practices can be challenging. Sustainable food procurement is difficult to incorporate into hospital food supply chains, which are tied to many other existing food processing, distribution, and procurement systems.

Hospitals are part of large contracted buying groups called group purchasing organizations (GPOs). Through GPOs, hospitals purchase everything from hospital equipment to food. Hospitals may have to buy a certain percentage—as high as 80-90 %—of their food through distributors from their GPO. Therefore, it is not always enough for a hospital to request a local and sustainable food item, since the particular product may or may not be available on contract. For these reasons, hospitals' efforts to purchase sustainable food represent significant efforts to change institutional policies and practices, as well as the wider healthcare foodservice industry.



Despite the peculiarity of hospital supply chains, several hospitals are making strides in procuring sustainable and healthier food. We interviewed three hospitals—Baptist Health South Florida, Overlake Hospital in Washington, and Union Hospital in Maryland—as well as their supply chain stakeholders, to describe how some hospitals have gone about implementing these types of changes.

## BAPTIST HEALTH SOUTH FLORIDA: DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

Baptist Health South Florida is a hospital system serving southern Florida and contains within it six acute care hospitals, more than 1,700 beds, and 16,000 employees. In 2012, Baptist Health provided over 1.9 million meals, of which 75-80% was served to employees and visitors.

Baptist Health's food service is almost completely self-operated. The exceptions include some cafes with national brands and catering events that are outsourced. Baptist Health currently has a contract through the Premier GPO with the distributor US Foods.

Ongoing partnerships with US Foods has allowed Baptist Health to emphasize its healthier food criteria to influence their purchasing practices and tracking of their food sources, noted Natalie Castro, Chief Wellness Dietitian at Baptist Health. This has also helped improve the ability to analyze potential new food offerings in a systematic way that includes their financial, nutrient, and wellness value.

Within the past 10 years, Baptist Health has worked on developing an official food policy to increase the availability of healthier options and change the food environment within the organization. Castro notes that having an official food environment policy has helped stakeholders across the hospital system, embrace change.

For example, the new food policy which provides guidelines for a daily vegetarian option, received little pushback. Baptist Health now offers menu options that are portioned controlled, contain more whole grains, legumes and fresh- and locally-sourced fruit and vegetables.

As part of its ongoing effort to support healthier food choices, Baptist Health came to identify the importance of sustainable food procurement practices; which included starting their own 10 acre organic garden on the Homestead, FL hospital campus, the Grow 2 Heal Garden; as well as, developing relationships with local farmers.

The Grow 2 Heal Garden serves to provide ingredients for Homestead Hospital's menus for patients, employees and guests, as well as the community.

Baptist Health recently defined sustainable practices as "providing food that is, affordable, good for the body, produced with care for the environment, and supports the local economy," said Pierre Sierralta, Corporate Supply Chain Manager for BHSF.

Baptist Health has also begun discussions with its produce vendor and US Foods to track where purchased foods come from. Sierralta states that this information will allow BHSF to determine the origin of the majority of their food purchases.

Due to Florida's particular geography and local ecology, Baptist Health is still defining its approach for sustainable procurement of meat products. Baptist Health hopes to be able to set concrete procurement goals around sustainability in the near future. Next steps include gathering the support of US Foods and vendors, and streamlining those goals across the six integrated BHSF hospitals.

Sierralta noted that "sustainability initiatives have to go hand in hand with wellness initiatives" in order for both to be successful. To do this, clear definitions need to be set and all stakeholders should be engaged. Each year with a strong emphasis on sustainably produced foods and local procurement. UWMC has accumulated multiple Healthy Food in Health Care awards for their healthy and environmentally focused foodservice operations, including two in 2014.

### Key Considerations

- Sustainability goals that go hand in hand with wellness initiatives can help gather buy-in from stakeholders.
- The definition of sustainability needs to be clear, and could include responsibility towards all members and stakeholders in the internal and external hospital communities, as well as the environment.
- Requesting feedback and support from food distributors may help determine how much food a hospital purchases and where that food is coming from.

## OVERLAKE MEDICAL CENTER: EFFECTIVE MARKETING

[Overlake Medical Center](#) is a nonprofit hospital in suburban Seattle, Washington. It has 349 beds and 2,500 employees. Overlake serves approximately 20,000 meals per month for patients and 31,000 meals per month in retail. In fiscal year 2015, its food and supply expenses were \$2.6 million. Overlake's food service is self-operated, and it relies primarily on Food Services of America for its food supply, but other distributors as well. Overlake also participates in direct farm purchasing and works with the Puget Sound Food Hub to find local producers, including a recent commitment to purchase sustainable meats from North Cascade Meat Producers Cooperative.

Chris Linaman, Food & Beverage Manager and Executive Chef at Overlake, worked with [Health Care Without Harm](#) to create a sustainable purchasing policy, which advises Overlake to purchase third-party certified sustainable food. Local food purchasing, defined as within 200 miles of the hospital, is also encouraged.

Additionally, purchasing meat and poultry raised without antibiotics is a significant component of the policy, noted Linaman, who is working to phase out the purchases of meat raised with the routine use of antibiotics. Over 78% of the poultry, beef, and pork that Overlake purchases is now produced without the routine use of antibiotics.

Unfortunately, all of these sustainable meat items, including hamburger patties, are more expensive. As a result, Linaman has raised the menu prices on sustainable meat offerings to offset the budgetary challenges. For Linaman, advertising and using these premium ingredients is important because "hospitals are in competition with each other." Linaman's goal has been to make dining at Overlake not only healthier, but more interesting. Advertising these specialty ingredients and dishes has brought positive media attention to Overlake.



Chris Linaman, Executive Chef at Overlake Medical Center serves a farm-to-table meal. (Chris Linaman)

Linaman has also enjoyed working with local vendors to purchase sustainable food: "Local people seem to be more open to negotiating and changing products," he said. "[I've developed] better relationships with local vendors [versus] sales reps."

Lucy Norris, Director of Marketing at the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, which coordinates regional food hub projects and connects producers and hospitals, argues that business from hospitals like Overlake is important. "In order for farmers to stay competitive, they need customers that will buy in volume," she said. "The market for local food has expanded beyond household consumers," she added.

### Key Considerations

- Local producers and vendors are interested in working with hospitals, especially if they purchase food products in volume.
- Effective marketing of sustainable and healthier foods in cafeterias and cafés can increase customer awareness and satisfaction with meals.



## UNION HOSPITAL OF CECIL COUNTY: NETWORKING LOCAL

[Union Hospital of Cecil County](#) is a rural hospital with 122 beds and 900 employees serving the city of Elkton, MD. In 2012, Union Hospital's self-operated food service served on average 628 retail meals, and 186 patient meals per day. The majority of the food needed for these meals came from across the country and were procured through the distributor US Foods.

In 2009, Union Hospital began to increase the amount of local and sustainably procured food. It was then that Union Hospital signed on to the [Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge](#) and also developed an internal "green team," said Holly Emmons, Food Service Manager at Union Hospital. After those milestones, Union Hospital developed a food policy which defined local foods as those originating within 250 miles of the hospital. The food policy also relies on labels certified by a third party to determine which foods are sustainably produced. Since their local and sustainable program began, Union Hospital has increasingly participated in farm-direct purchasing with local farms, and continues to work with local farms to expand the variety of foods purchased to include more protein sources for beef, chicken, and pork raised without the use of routine antibiotics, shared Emmons. In fiscal year 2012, 32% of Union Hospital's purchased foods came from local farms and 17% had third party certified sustainable food labels.



Shane Hughes, owner of Liberty Delight Farms. (Holly Emmons.)

A key component of Union Hospital's sustainability policy is to procure meat raised without the routine use of antibiotics. As a result, in 2009, the hospital started purchasing beef, pork, and poultry from Shane Hughes, owner of Liberty Delight Farms in Reisterstown, MD. As part of sustainable farming practices, Hughes notes that the 80-acre Liberty Farms does not routinely use antibiotics while raising any of its cattle, pigs, or poultry.

Benchmarking to 2009, "Union Hospital increased its purchases of sustainably-raised meat to 27% in 2010 and 60% in 2012," noted Emmons. As sustainable meat purchases increased, the purchases of processed foods decreased. Similarly, purchases of foods through US Foods, Union Hospital's main distributor, decreased to accommodate the increases in local purchases. Emmons remarked that working within a budget can be difficult, but that by decreasing the purchases of processed and less healthy foods, Union Hospital was able to stay under its projected food budget in recent years, while still providing local, sustainable, and healthier choices.

"Networking with others interested in local, sustainable, and healthy foods has been important," said Emmons. By presenting at meetings sponsored by the Maryland Department of Agriculture and participating in buy-local challenges, Union Hospital has been able to connect with additional farms and educate communities on sustainable practices. Buyer-grower conferences, where farmers can directly meet purchasers from hospitals, schools and other institutions, are "important to making relationships," said Hughes.

### Key Considerations

- Staying within a food budget involves buying less processed foods and having a committed team to make food in-house.
- Meeting with other stakeholders in the supply chain, such as at buyer-grower conferences, provides opportunities to increase sustainable food offerings in the supply chain.

## Learn More

The Healthy Food in Health Care Program provides a number of resources to support hospitals in developing and deepening local and sustainable food purchasing programs. Please check out the following:

- The [Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge](#) is a pledge taken by hospitals which provides a framework and steps to be taken to improve the health of patients, communities, and the environment. Hundreds of healthcare facilities and food service contractors across the United States have signed the pledge to demonstrate their commitment to “first, do no harm” and treat food and its production and distribution as preventive medicine.
- [Sustainable Food Definitions Checklist](#)  
Understanding what to look for when purchasing sustainably produced foods can be complicated. See our handy checklist to better understand the third party certifications and label claims that we deem highly meaningful to help you in your purchasing process.

Visit our website for these and many other valuable tools and resources:

[www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org](http://www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org)



## Sustainable Food Purchasing in Hospitals Case Studies

*March 2016*

Health Care Without Harm seeks to transform the health sector worldwide, without compromising patient safety or care, to become ecologically sustainable and a leading advocate for environmental health and justice.

This paper was produced by Health Care Without Harm’s national Healthy Food in Health Care program, which harnesses the purchasing power and expertise of the health care sector to advance the development of a sustainable food system.

Visit [www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org) for more information.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Brook Belay, MD MPH, Medical Officer, Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provided public health guidance and assisted with the interviews and development of this report.