Environmental Sustainability Programs for HOSPITALS

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D o no harm. The underlying tenet in health care applies to all hospital operations, not just those that take place within hospital walls. Saving lives and promoting community health certainly are commendable undertakings. To fully realize those goals, hospitals must be good environmental stewards.

Yet hospitals are in an unusual predicament. As community leaders and stewards of community health, providing care generates considerable waste material — more than 6,500 tons per day nationwide — that jams landfills and creates environmental and health hazards. Environmental sustainability programs help hospitals significantly reduce their impact. They also can lower costs, improve organizational performance and enhance the patient and employee experience.

There are multiple opportunities to enhance organizational sustainability, from waste management, energy efficiency, water management and the build environment. Sustainability programs should reflect each organization’s unique needs and characteristics. Implementing a sustainability program requires significant cultural change and time.

A good place to start is by examining what comes out of the facility. Waste reduction involves diverting waste from landfills through recycling, source reduction, reuse, repurposing and composting. Eighty percent of hospital waste is solid waste; about 50 percent of which is recyclable. Focusing on waste disposal will provide some easy gains that can build support and recognition for more challenging sustainability efforts.

“Waste management is a critical piece of an overall sustainability plan,” says Janet Brown, director of sustainable operations for Practice Greenhealth. “Hospitals need to look at the amount of waste generated in the process of care and the associated costs.”

Many hospitals do not know how much they spend on total waste management because they have a variety of waste streams managed by different departments and operated by different vendors. Hospital waste typically falls into one of the following categories: solid waste, regulated medical waste, hazardous waste, pharmaceutical waste, universal waste, and recycled waste. Getting a handle on the totality of waste coming out of the facility will help organizations establish a baseline, set goals and prioritize actions.

Involvement by the C-suite and board of trustees is essential. “The more that leadership is involved, the better,” says Sister Mary Ellen Lesieiwetzki, ecology program coordinator for Catholic Healthcare West, San Francisco. “Everyone gets the buy-in and support for the initiative. Trustees help establish baseline, set goals and prioritize actions.

The next step is to establish teams to oversee implementation and evaluation of the organization’s performance. Sustainability teams should include individuals and departments from throughout the organization. If possible, organizations should hire a sustainability director to coordinate the efforts. “Most employees live in the community, so garnering support is not very challenging,” says Linda Lee, health care solutions operations director for Waste Management Inc., Houston. Adds Lesieiwetzki, “Sustainability isn’t just about saving money and the environment. It’s about relationship-building with employees and the community.”

CREATING A SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

There are many opportunities for health care organizations to become sustainable. The best place to start is with a cohesive plan that will integrate sustainability into the organization strategic framework.

MAKE A COMMITMENT
Senior leadership and the board must commit to sustainability and establish a comprehensive environmental policy. Senior leadership should establish the link between the organization’s mission and sustainability.

ESTABLISH A BASELINE
Organizations must establish a baseline before embarking on a sustainability program. The best place to start is with a facility wide audit of waste, energy consumption and water usage. Benchmarking data is available from Practice Greenhealth and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Energy Star Program, among others.

CREATE A GREEN TEAM
Establish a Green Team to oversee the sustainability initiative. The team should reflect a broad representation of the organization, including senior management, purchasing, food services, environmental services and nursing.

IDENTIFY DRIVERS AND BARRIERS
Be clear about what’s behind your organization’s sustainability initiative. Whether it’s cost savings or better environmental performance or improved community health, identifying the drivers — and barriers — will help set goals and increase the likelihood of the initiative’s success.

CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS
The achievement of goals and milestones should be celebrated. It’s important to share the organization’s efforts with the community as well.

APPLY NEW GOALS
Set goals and monitor progress.

REACH GOALS
Set and reach goals.

ASSESS PERFORMANCE
Organizations should continually evaluate the organization’s performance toward meeting sustainability goals.

(1) SET GOALS
It’s important to set both short- and long-term goals. Set some initial, achievable goals to build momentum and support for the organization’s sustainability initiative.

(2) ASSESS PERFORMANCE
Organizations should continually evaluate the organization’s performance toward meeting sustainability goals.

(3) CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS
The achievement of goals and milestones should be celebrated. It’s important to share the organization’s efforts with the community as well.

Hospitals spend about $10 billion annually on waste disposal, according to the American Hospital Association’s Sustainability Roadmap for Hospitals.

Source: IH&H, January 9, 2013
The Sustainability Roadmap for Hospitals will help you chart a course of action, set targets, and monitor your road to sustainability and sustainable operations. Whether you are a CEO, sustainability manager, facility engineer, supply chain director, environmental services director, or other healthcare professional committed to performance improvement and sustainable health care operations, the Sustainability Roadmap will help you learn best practice, strategize, prioritize, and implement plans to achieve your organization’s sustainability goals, regardless of where you are in the journey.

The roadmap includes resources from the following Personal Membership Groups (PMG’s) of the American Hospital Association:

- Building Design & Construction
- Energy
- Water
- Waste Stream Management
- Chemicals
- Environmentally Preferred Interior Finish Selections
- Supply Chain
- Environmentally Preferred Purchasing
- Material Use, Waste Management