

# Expanding Regional Organic Purchasing

# HEALTH CARE'S ROLE IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS



The human and environmental health benefits of purchasing and serving organic food begin on the farm and extend to the consumer and beyond. The United States Department of Agriculture established its Organic Certification program to comply with the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, and maintains rigorous standards for farmers who use its seal. Organic standards preserve the environment by regulating soil and water quality, livestock practices, allowable food additives, and pest management. Historically, the term “organic” has also referred to stewardship efforts that go beyond the organic standards; with farmers and ranchers often creating integrated farming systems that focus on preserving biodiversity and reducing climate impact.

# Organic is...

## Better for Farmers and Farming Communities

Agricultural workers and rural communities face a much greater risk of suffering pesticide-related illnesses than any other sector of society.<sup>12</sup> Children of farm workers are particularly vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> Studies of farmworker communities in California's Salinas Valley found that pregnant women had levels of organophosphate pesticide metabolite levels in urine 30-40% higher than U.S. national reference levels reported for women of child-bearing age.<sup>4</sup> More than 78% of women in the study had detectable levels of at least one organophosphate pesticide-specific metabolite, and over 30% had two or more.<sup>5</sup> Workers are exposed directly in fields, through pesticide drift in the air, and through take-home exposures on clothing. In addition to threats from direct pesticide poisoning, evidence continues to mount showing that certain agricultural pesticides increase the risk of cancer, birth defects, reproductive disorders, and neurodevelopmental disorders in farm workers, their children, and farming communities.<sup>6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13</sup> The USDA National Organic Program prohibits the use of synthetic chemical pesticides.



## Better for Children

Children and infants are known to have a much lower tolerance level for pesticides than adults.<sup>14</sup> A University of Washington study found that pesticide levels in children's urine dropped dramatically when the children were switched to a primarily organic diet.<sup>15</sup> Another study showed that children consuming conventionally-raised produce and juice had pesticide levels six times higher than children consuming a 75% organic diet.<sup>16</sup> Studies of umbilical cord blood have shown that pesticides can travel through the umbilical cord in pregnant women, which may impact the developing fetus.<sup>17</sup>

## Better for the Environment

Pesticide use contributes to air and water pollution, threatens biodiversity, and threatens the pollinators on which much of agriculture depends. Multiple studies have linked certain types of pesticides to honeybee Colony Collapse Disorder, which causes the disappearance or death of entire hives.<sup>18 19</sup> Since 1960, synthetic crop fertilization practices have caused flows of biologically available nitrogen in terrestrial ecosystems to double, and flows of phosphorus to triple.<sup>20</sup> Nitrogen and phosphorus runoff from cropland and animal feeding operations are major contributors to water pollution, resulting in algal blooms, oxygen depletion, and fish declines in streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, and marine ecosystems.<sup>21</sup> Promoting ecological balance and conserving biodiversity are basic tenets of USDA National Organic Standards, which provide detailed oversight of a product from farm to table ensuring that products are inspected and tested for synthetic chemicals and allowable growing practices on a regular basis.



## What Does 'Certified Organic' Mean?

**Organic crops:** The USDA organic seal verifies that irradiation, sewage sludge, synthetic fertilizers, prohibited pesticides, and genetically modified organisms were not used.

**Organic livestock:** The USDA organic seal verifies that producers met animal health and welfare standards, did not use antibiotics or growth hormones, used 100% organic feed, and provided animals with access to the outdoors.

**Organic multi-ingredient foods:** The USDA organic seal verifies that the product has 95% or more certified organic content. If the label claims that it was made with specified organic ingredients, you can be sure that those specific ingredients are certified organic.

Organic standards must be verified by a USDA-accredited certifying agent before products can be labeled USDA organic. Organic operations must demonstrate that they are protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity, and using approved substances.



# The Power of Health Care Purchasing

Health care institutions have an important opportunity to protect the health of their patients, employees and visitors, agricultural workers, farming communities and the environment by sourcing and serving organic foods.

Their large purchasing volume can have a significant impact by creating new markets for organic producers – thus supporting growth in the sector so that more farms become organic. When these purchasing dollars are focused on local/regional products, that public and environmental health impact is felt closer to home – not to mention the positive economic impact on farmers and others in the processing and distribution chain.

By promoting their organic purchasing, as well as the motivation behind it, health care institutions have an opportunity to educate their patrons and be recognized for the valuable role they are playing to strengthen healthy and sustainable food systems. In addition, when they feed patients organic foods, hospitals model organically grown food as an important part of a healthy diet, so that when they go home, they might continue to purchase and eat more organic foods.







# Understanding Challenges

Although the healthcare market has long been interested in purchasing more organic produce and other foods, healthcare foodservice professionals regularly cite cost as their top barrier to increasing purchases of organic foods. Organic foods can cost more because organic farmers do not have the same chemical pest control tools at their disposal, and their crops are more vulnerable. Additionally, organic farmers have to rely more heavily on farm labor and management, which increases their operational costs.

Industrial scale, conventionally grown food costs less because the health and environmental costs of this chemically-intensive agriculture are externalized, and are passed on to consumers and governments in the form of polluted water, soil erosion, and increased health care costs. Hospitals are a vital partner in building local and global food chains that promote the health of communities while protecting our air, land, and water.

Another key challenge identified by many hospitals has been the lack of availability of organic foods through existing supply chains. In addition, ordering organic produce may require extra steps in the ordering process to make their preferences known to their suppliers and ensure they are provided with ordering guides that include product eco-labels such as organic. Hospitals interested in ordering organics can streamline the process by partnering with other institutions to bring a collective voice to the bargaining table. Hospitals can often purchase off contract if preferred products are not available and they can work with local produce distributors, food hubs, coops, and other local food organizations to connect with organic producers and their products.



## **Chef's tip for planning seasonal menus:**

"Be specific about protein and vague about veg."

— Arran Stark,  
Executive  
Chef, Jefferson  
Healthcare

# Where do I start?

## Prioritizing

Institutions looking to start purchasing organics often feel overwhelmed with the process of prioritizing organic food spend. Almost all product categories can be swapped for organic so it's important to look at where your dollar can have the greatest impact. Resources such as Environmental Working Groups 'Dirty Dozen' (available at [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)) can be used to prioritize produce items with the highest pesticide residues. Another strategy might be to prioritize salad bar offering where the produce is highly visible and served in raw form, potentially leading to higher residue exposure.

## Purchasing Strategies

### *Use Existing Distribution Channels*

The easiest way for health care food service to start purchasing organics is to work within their existing distribution channels. Distributors have access to a variety of organic product offerings and can let customers know which products are comparable in price. Purchasing through existing pathways allows facilities to introduce organic products seamlessly into current ordering systems. Increasing organic demand through existing supply chains sends a message to distributors that your facility is willing to pay a premium for cleaner, healthier products.



## Cost-savings Strategies for Increasing Organic Produce Purchases

- Ask your produce vendor for a list of your top produce purchases, and ask them to identify what the cost difference would be to purchase those items with organic certification. Identify items with a small price difference between organic and conventional, such as bananas or salad greens, and start with those items.
- Buy organic produce at the height of the growing season, when costs will be lowest. Hospital kitchen staff might process fresh produce at slow, low-census times; for example, staff could freeze large volumes of summer fruits for use during the rest of the year.
- Work with local organic farmers to identify crops they have in excess during the growing season, and negotiate a purchase that takes advantage of health care volumes.
- Work with local organic farmers to identify specific items you'd like to purchase, and discuss with them in advance the possibility of them planting crops specifically for the hospital's use. Hospitals have an advantage in that their menus do not change too often and the volumes of specific items do not change significantly. This means that farmers will be able to plan for how much of a specific item the hospital will need over several months and have a guaranteed customer. It's a win-win.
- Reduce food waste to reduce overall food costs, and invest those cost-savings in organic or other sustainably-raised items.
- Look for cost reduction options in other product categories to offset the higher cost of organic.
- Collaborate with institutions in your area to drive costs down by increasing needed volume.





## ***Work with a Local Farm***

Health Care facilities often utilize direct “farm to hospital” relationships when developing CSA or farmer’s market programs. Direct purchasing for health care food service operations may also be an option for some facilities. The key is identifying farms that produce the volumes you are looking for and are capable of meeting your delivery and payment needs. Good communication and flexibility can build a program that serves both the hospital and grower as well as enhances the experience of your eaters. If your administration has food safety concerns about direct purchasing, ask potential farmers about their good agricultural practices (GAP) systems and certifications, as these have become standard in the industry and address handling practices from field to your kitchen. To identify potential farms contact local food and farm to fork organizations in your community.

## ***Support Your Local Food Hub***

If your region is home to a food aggregation center or “food hub” this can be a great way to bridge the gap between purchasing direct from a local farm and working with an existing distributor. Aggregation centers support local farms by charging lower distribution fees and make purchasing simple for institutions by providing distribution services. These centers often provide easy online ordering systems and survey producers to ensure safe, quality product that complies with hospital food safety guidelines.

## **Incorporating Organic Foods into Your Food Service Operation**

It may be easiest to begin to incorporate organic items in retail settings, where prices can be adjusted to reflect any increased costs. However, some hospitals choose to begin with patient menus, where they can advertise organic items to patients.

### ***Retail:***

- Feature organic items on the salad bar, where you easily change signage based on organic availability
- Feature organic vegetables as a hot daily side
- Utilize organic ingredients in daily specials and advertise organic ingredients
- Place displays of organic fruit in high-traffic areas to promote healthy snacking
- Patient Menus:

- Identify organic items you can purchase on a regular basis, and specifically name them on the item description
- Utilize images of the USDA Organic logo on the menu
- Use patient menus as an opportunity to educate patients about organic foods
- Campus Activities
- Introduce an organic CSA program at your facility
- Host a farmers market during the growing season

## **Promoting Organic Foods**

The most important element of incorporating organic items in your food service is their promotion. Customers will often pay a little more if they perceive an item is of higher quality. This is also a way to educate patients, staff, and visitors about the importance of eating more organic foods and supporting organic farmers.



### **Did you know?**

- 81% of U.S. households reported buying some kind of organic food in 2014 <sup>22</sup>
- Certified organic cropland made up only 0.7% of U.S. cropland in 2011 <sup>23</sup>
- Organic food accounts for about 4% of total U.S. food sales <sup>24</sup>
- Produce is the most popular organic item (43% of all U.S. organic food sales), followed by dairy (15%), packaged/prepared foods (11%), beverages (11%), bread/grains (9%), snack foods (5%), meat/fish/poultry (3%), and condiments (3%) <sup>25</sup>

## **Learning From Others**

For more tips and inspiration see our [Case Studies](#) on hospitals with organic purchasing programs.

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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.

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

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