

# Incorporating Locally and Sustainably Produced Foods into Food Services

## Good Shepherd Healthcare

Good Shepherd Healthcare is a 49-bed hospital in the rural eastern Oregon community of Hermiston. In 2005, the hospital took the position that sustainably produced foods were healthier for its patients and community, so it overhauled its food service system for both patient and cafeteria meals to reflect that position. The changes included sourcing locally and sustainably produced foods, eliminating processed foods in favor of fresh ingredients, and switching to room service-style patient meals in place of set meal times.

### The Food

Like many health care systems, Good Shepherd's food service utilized a variety of processed foods. Processed foods are advantageous because they offer consistency of food quality and often require little preparation for service. This can simplify food service and lower labor costs.

However, processed foods often contain preservatives and other chemicals that can contribute to poor health. In addition, processed foods do not offer the health benefits of fresh foods such as greater quantities of vitamins, minerals and disease-fighting phytochemicals.

Good Shepherd wanted to utilize the benefits of fresh, sustainably produced foods, so the hospital prioritized the purchase of foods produced with the least amount of chemical inputs (pesticides, hormones and preservatives), in closest proximity to Hermiston (increasing freshness, supporting local farms and decreasing fossil fuel use for transportation). The result is that the hospital is a showcase for sustainable, northwest grown and raised foods.

The response to the new menu has been very positive, even drawing community members from outside the hospital to the cafeteria for meals. Menu items include, wild Alaskan salmon, roasted sweet potatoes, house-made cobblers, bison burger (75% lower in fat than ground beef,), homemade bread with Shepherd's Grain flour (a locally and sustainably produced grain), rBGH-free dairy products, local and organic produce, meats raised without the use of hormones or antibiotics, and house-made chili.

Good Shepherd found that they have been able to eliminate most canned and packaged foods such as canned soup, gravy mixes, and potato chips—eliminating many of the food additives such as MSG and gluten that were aggravating the illnesses of some patients.

In addition, the focus on local fresh foods has led to more creativity in the kitchen, with staff reporting increased job satisfaction. Local availability of foods is often dictated by the season. For example berries are plentiful in the summer months, while apples are harvested in the fall. This means Good Shepherd chefs plan menus based on the season, leaving room for variability (for example using the term "seasonal vegetables") and finding creative ways to use ingredients that are available at that particular time of year.

## Food Preparation

In order to serve fresh food, Good Shepherd switched to a cook-to-order system. Instead of set meal times, the hospital's patients now choose from a menu, ordering at any time between the hours of 7AM and 12AM. This system has worked well for ill patients, whose fluctuating appetites did not always fit into set meal times.

With a new menu and a new cook-to-order system, came a new division of labor in the kitchen. Good Shepherd did not increase its kitchen staff, but instead eliminated individual job descriptions and created kitchen teams. Team job descriptions require collaboration among employees, and allow the staff to diversify their skills. Employee education, stressing the importance of the kitchen's work for the health of the patients and community, played a key role in instilling a sense of ownership and pride in the work.

The only additional equipment necessary for the new system was two stainless steel prep tables with refrigerated compartments and bins to hold fresh, chopped vegetables.

## Sourcing

Sourcing locally and sustainably produced foods was simple for certain items but more challenging for others. Good Shepherd worked closely with its Spokane, Washington based food distributor to explore options. They were able to stock organic, fair trade, coffee, some organic produce, and some locally-produced items through the company. For items that the distributor was unable to carry, Good Shepherd formed partnerships with local producers for direct purchase of fresh vegetables and grass-fed beef. As availability with smaller producers is in flux, the hospital orders what is available locally, and the distributor fills in the gaps.

In other instances, Good Shepherd purchasers did the leg work in finding a local source for an item and then were able to convince the distributor to carry it. For example, the hospital worked with Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility to locate a regional source of milk free of recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH)—also called recombinant bovine somatotropin (rbST)—a hormone banned in almost every industrialized country including the all 25 countries of the European Union, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan because of potential human health and animal welfare concerns. As a result, the distributor is now stocking rBGH/rBST-free milk, available to the entire region.

Additionally, the hospital was able to form a purchasing relationship with a local organic produce grower, Gala Springs. Under the agreement, the farm grows items specifically for Good Shepherd, and backhauls berries and other organic produce that they do not grow to the hospital on their return trips from Portland. Formerly, the truck would come back empty.

## Reduced Costs

Good Shepherd has found that by reducing their purchase of processed food items they have been able to save money. For example the hospital now buys chicken in one form, using it for a variety of dishes, as opposed to the old system in which they bought six forms of pre-prepared chicken. In addition the hospital has realized a significant savings through waste reduction. In the former "heat-and-serve" system, food trays often came back full, with the new menu they don't. Buying fresh has also allowed Good Shepherd to eliminate the disposal costs of processed food packaging, and more accurately estimate their food needs.

In fiscal year 2006 compared to 2005 the hospital reported:

- a 19% increase in meals served;
- a 6% decrease in cost of labor per meal due to increased sales;
- an 11% decrease in food cost; and
- a 15% decrease in overall cost per meal.

## Beyond the Hospital

Good Shepherd's efforts to support healthy sustainable food extend beyond their cafeteria and patient food. The hospital hosts a community buying group for grass-fed meat through Thundering Hooves, a Washington sustainable meat producer. Plans are in motion for a once a week produce stand which will be held in conjunction with Thundering Hooves meat pick-up days.

## Benefits

Good Shepherd's new food service system has brought the hospital national recognition and has raised their Press Ganey Scores to the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile in 9 areas. (Press Ganey Associates is the health care industry's leading independent vendor of satisfaction measurement and improvement services.)

Other benefits include:

### Health

- Increases community, staff, and patient access to healthy foods.
- Encourages incorporation of healthy foods into diet.
- Protects our antibiotic supply against growing threat of antibiotic resistance
- Minimizes health risks of pesticides from exposure in foods, and to farm workers and communities through reduced drift and contamination of air and water.
- Supports indirect climate change impacts from long distance food transport

## Community

- Supports local growers
- Creates new community partnerships
- Reduces waste
- Improves local socio-economic health

## Conclusion

Health care systems can incorporate locally and sustainably produced food into patient and cafeteria meals in a cost effective way, with significant benefit to the health of the individual and community. To maximize effectiveness, it is important to diversify food sourcing, and to change the food service system on all levels rather than simply replacing a conventional food item with an organic/sustainable food item.

## For more information

### Visit:

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

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