

Strategies to Increase Sustainable Food Options via GPOs and Distributors



There are many strategies a hospital or health system can use to increase the availability of sustainably produced food options via existing supply channels and relationships. Here are just a few:

Know what is going out to bid

Many group purchasing organizations (GPOs) have public bid calendars. In these calendars you can find information on what individual food items, product categories or services (e.g., food service and distribution) will be going out to bid and roughly when. Links to the calendars can usually be found under the supplier section of a GPOs website.

Be clear about preferences

As consumers and institutions increasingly prefer products that are preferable from an ecological standpoint, “green washing”—misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service—has become rampant. There are many health care specific resources available on the Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) website, www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org and via our regional organizers to help you to delineate your own preferences.

Communicate preferences to GPOs

Always communicate your purchasing preferences to your GPOs and preferably in writing, so you can also copy your distributor. If you have adopted a food policy that prioritizes that food items be produced a certain way (e.g., milk produced without use of recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) or chicken produced without use of arsenic compounds or antibiotics) make sure your purchasing partners are aware of this. It can also be helpful to let them know in advance. For

instance, “within one year, it is our goal to . . . , and we hope you can help us with this.” Often when hospitals or health systems articulate these preferences as a group, GPOs are more likely to respond. There is power in numbers.

Ask for information on current availability

It is much easier to choose a sustainably produced food item if you know what is available through your distributor and how to order it. Hospitals consistently report that they have no idea what sustainable food products are available to them through their distributor or how to order from catalogs. Thus, it is important to encourage distributors to adapt ordering systems to allow for easy identification of food items that meet your desired sustainability criteria (e.g., products that are grown locally, third-party certified or have a sustainability label claim. For more information on these types of criteria see the Green Guide for Health Care Food Service Credits and the accompanying tools on the Planning and Benchmarking section of the HCWH website, www.noharm.org/us_canada/issues/food/planning.php.

Also ask distributors for instructions on how to use whatever tools they provide to increase your institution’s purchase of desired products. Be sure to get regular updates on new products as they become available to you.

Request development of custom contracts

If your hospital or health system has a GPO relationship that allows for custom contracting, work with the appropriate contact within your facility or system to determine what type of sustainable products you want. Next communicate your needs to your GPO through the appropriate channels and ask them to establish contracts with specifications that meet your requirements.

Serve on food advisory, contract development committees

Most GPOs have committees made up of representatives from member health care facilities that help make contract decisions. By serving on such a committee, you can bring information about sustainably produced food items to the discussions, and ask that in addition to evaluating products based on taste, price, size, nutritional quality, etc. that the ecological health impacts and/ or attributes of a food item be considered during the bid and contracting processes.

Refer specialty suppliers

GPOs generally send requests for proposals only to suppliers that have registered on their websites. These suppliers tend to be large companies that can provide a product of uniform size, quality, etc. to their members nationwide via existing distributor relationships. Hospitals and health systems can help their GPO to increase their knowledge of and access to more specialty suppliers by encouraging them to register as a potential supplier with their GPO. Even just sharing information on preferred suppliers with GPO representatives and/ or directly to a food advisory committee when they are gearing up to do a request for proposal can be helpful.

In using these and other strategies, hospitals can increase the market for farmers who are already using more sustainable practices and also help to shift the practices of conventional producers in a more sustainable direction.

RESOURCES

A Purchasing Guide to Sourcing Dairy Products Produced Without rBGH

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Purchasing_Non-rBGH_Dairy.pdf

Purchaser's Guide to Sourcing Sustainable Coffee and Tea

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Sourcing_Sustainable_Coffee_Tea.pdf

Purchaser's Guide to Sourcing Sustainable Poultry

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Purchas_Sustainable_Poultry.pdf

Guide to Poultry Applicable Eco-labels

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Poultry_Eco-Labels.pdf

Sample Poultry Supplier Survey Questions

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Poultry_Supp_Survey_Quest.pdf

Purchaser's Guide to Sourcing Food Without Genetically Engineered Ingredients

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Purchasing_Non-GMO_Food.pdf

Food Eco-Labels A Purchasing Guide

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/Food_Eco-Labels.pdf

Choosing Environmentally Preferable Food Service Ware

www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/EPP_Food_Svc_Ware.pdf

Buying Better Chicken: A Resource to buying chicken Raised without Antibiotics and Arsenic for Schools, Hospitals and Other Purchasers

www.iatp.org/files/Buying%20Better%20Chicken042011.pdf



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Health Care without Harm (HCWH) is an international coalition of organizations working to transform the health care sector, without compromising patient safety or care, so that it is ecologically sustainable and no longer a source of harm to public health and the environment. HCWH's Healthy Food in Health Care (HFHC) Program works with hospitals across the country to build a healthier, more sustainable food system, providing education and resources to make the connection between the food they serve and the health of their patients, staff and community.

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