



## Fundamentals of Sustainable Health Systems

## Cases & Faces of Sustainable Healthcare

### Hotspot: Food Sustainability

#### Case Study: Local Food Procurement at Halton Healthcare, Halton Hills, Ontario

##### Setting: Halton Healthcare

- Located in the Greater Toronto Area
- Comprised of three community hospitals: Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, Georgetown Hospital, and Milton District Hospital
- Run by almost 5,600 physicians, staff and volunteers
- The three sites serve the needs of half a million residents, and serve more than half a million patient meals annually

## Introduction

The definition of “local food” varies by province and territory across Canada (1). However, it is overwhelmingly recognized as food grown and/or produced either within province or territory, or a specified distance from where it is consumed. Local food is generally fresher and requires less travel time, reducing transport emission; it therefore has distinct benefits for the environment, health, and local economies. As Canada’s health sector spends approximately four billion dollars on food on an annual basis, it can leverage its purchasing power to support local food producers (1).

Halton Healthcare Services (HHS) has been working to increase the proportion of local food in its dietary offerings since 2013, when then-manager of retail food services, Marianne Katusin, heard buzz in the media and at food services events of the pending Ontario legislation known as the “Local Food Act” (Bill 36). She began to consider how the Local Food Act would impact broader public sector institutions such as hospitals, as “there was going to be potentially a requirement for us to report local food purchases, track local food purchases, and so forth.” Marianne and her team realized they would be unable to furnish the necessary data if the bill was enacted, so they set to work devising a local food strategy for retail food purchasing.

Marianne connected with Halton’s food distributor, Gordon Food Service, and found them to be “very well versed on local food availability”—they had pre-established partnerships with some local vendors and had previously received a grant from the Ontario Greenbelt Fund to develop their own local food project (2). Upon learning of this funding opportunity, Marianne and her team applied for and received a grant as a broad public sector institution (BPS) to create one of Canada’s first local food procurement statements in healthcare with their “Good for you...Locally Grown” project. The project initially focused on retail food procurement, though Marianne hoped to expand the scope to include patient food procurement in the future.

A key part of the project was the development of 14 organizational goals to support the purchasing of local foods at Halton Healthcare (3).

## 14 organizational goals to support the purchasing of local foods at Halton Healthcare

1. Increase the amount and diversity of local foods we are purchasing at our facility by 5 – 10 %
2. Develop a partnership with our Distributor to identify local foods available through their current product offerings

3. Work with Distributor Chef & staff on developing and testing recipes highlighting local foods
4. Develop specifications for sandwiches using local ingredients with our manufacturer partner ensuring nutrition standards, quality, price and food safety. Develop a marketing tool to identify the ingredients of the sandwiches as being local food items (i.e., Local sticker or label)
5. Introduce local foods to our customers/staff/patients/volunteers through marketing and sampling in the cafeteria
6. In partnership with our Public Relations department and various industry associations, produce promotional/marketing information outlining the benefits of local foods(i.e., Turkey Marketing Board, Foodland Ontario, Ontario Apple Growers, Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers)
7. In partnership with our Public Relations department, produce marketing information specific to the menus at Halton Healthcare outlining the local foods available to our patients and customers (i.e., HHS Local Food Logo to be used on menus received by patients and enhanced signage in the cafeterias)
8. As a joint initiative with our manufacturer and distributor partner, educate our frontline staff and customers about local food availability through presentations at lunch & learn sessions and information booths by various local manufacturers and associations. An opportunity to ask questions at the manufacturer level provides the ability for our staff and customers to understand the food source will increase their confidence in making local purchases.
9. Provide education to our departmental frontline staff so they become part of the local food delivery system and gain a sense of ownership and pride in providing local foods to our patients and customers.
10. Work with our GPO – Health Pro Canada - on reviewing the criteria utilized to evaluate contracts and determine if the “local items” can be prioritized in rating when all other criteria are equal. (BPS Procurement Directive does not allow contracts to be awarded based on whether food is local or not)
11. Allow project co-leads and staff champions to attend various educational symposiums, meetings and conferences to gain knowledge about Ontario products.
12. Create an internal tracking system for determining and reporting of statistical figures on the amounts of local foods purchased.
13. Develop a local procurement policy for Food Services at HHS.
14. In partnership with our Public Relations department, the Hospital Foundation and our media partners in the community, market HHS’s participation in this local initiative and the support received through The Greenbelt Fund promoting Ontario food.

As a first step in achieving these goals, Marianne and her team set out to establish a baseline for HHS's current local food procurement against which goals could be set. This analysis was guided by the Ontario Local Food Act's definition of 'local food' as:

- a. Food produced or harvested in Ontario, including forest or freshwater food, and
- b. Food and beverages [that] include ingredients produced or harvested in Ontario (4)

It was determined that 3% of all food purchases were local, and that all of this "local" food was produce. The team established a project goal of increasing local food purchases to 10%. In one year, they exceeded their goal and achieved 15% of local food in retail; this was accomplished "by identifying and testing new local products in retherm ovens to ensure consistency, running taste panels to test recipes made with local products, hosting cooking demonstrations, supporting new menu creation and more." (5)

This success and the knowledge gained at the hospital retail level became the springboard for transforming patient food services and extending local procurement beyond retail at HHS. When Marianne became Manager of Patient Food Services in 2015, she applied for and received a second round of grant funding through the Ontario Greenbelt Fund and transferred her knowledge into the patient side of the operation. As part of the process for grant funding, Marianne and her team:

1. Collected baseline data on current local food purchasing practice (Gordon Food Services provided the velocity reports)
2. Determined local food purchasing targets
3. Set specific goals and outcomes
4. Developed a local food procurement statement

With the help of Greenbelt Funding, Marianne and her team have achieved significant gains in local food procurement—currently, 30% of the food items on the menu at HHS are locally sourced.

These gains have been guided by HHS's local food procurement statement (5), which outlines actions to increase local foods, including increasing the proportion of meals cooked on-site, training staff to prepare meals from scratch, developing recipes using local and seasonal ingredients, and pursuing partnerships with local manufacturers:

## HALTON HEALTHCARE SERVICES (HHS) LOCAL FOOD PROCUREMENT STATEMENT

At HHS, we believe that making good food choices is an important part of health and wellness. In our efforts to achieve our Mission and Vision statements, we will support the health of our communities through the following actions:

- Increase the amount of local foods purchased at HHS.
- Enhance our patient and customer awareness of the availability and diversity of local food in Ontario.
- Support our local farmers and producers by hosting food expos and theme menu days.
- Educate and train our department staff about local foods.
- Expand partnerships with key manufacturers and distributors to develop sustainable menu planning and procurement of local food ingredients.
- Partner with manufacturers of the healthcare food service industry in the development of local products that will meet the nutritional, quality, pricing and food safety standards required in healthcare institutions.
- Share key learnings in the implementation of this ongoing initiative so that other healthcare institutions can benefit from the opportunity of increasing local food options in the communities they serve.

Marianne credits several key changes for the team's success. First among these is a shift in how local food is tracked. Initially, Marianne and her team were using a spreadsheet to track local food procurement but realized they could mobilize HHS's food service management software, "Computrition," for this task. Using this software, food services can now track the percentage of local food for individual food items (such as eggs) or broader food categories (such as dairy). This detailed understanding of where specific foods are sourced from allows the team to establish baselines, set goals, and identify opportunities to increase local food integration.

Another key to HHS's ability to procure more local food was developing the capacity to produce meals on-site. Halton's newest site, the Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, opened in 2015. It was designed with a full production kitchen enabling Halton to bring scratch-cooking back in-house. "We are now able to look at various categories on our menu and determine if it is cost-effective for us to produce it using local ingredients in-house". This also meant that the on-site cook could develop recipes featuring local foods, devise alternatives from scratch when local options were unavailable, and collaborate with clinical dietitians to create in-house recipes that meet the specific needs of patients.

Gordon Food Service has proven to be a great partner in supporting the local food project. “We were able to take 30 staff over three different sessions to their test kitchen and...the staff had an opportunity to participate and develop local recipes using local ingredients.” The Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial site is the main production site supporting the two other HHS sites (Milton District Hospital and Georgetown Hospital) with in-house produced entrees and soups.

One of the impacts of having a production kitchen and a focus on local procurement was that it enhanced HHS’s award-winning room service food model, which allows patients to order their food, and have it made and delivered to their room. The team modified the room service menu by placing a little green tractor beside items made with local ingredients. This has increased patient awareness of the origins of their foods, and the team has worked to shed further light on this through other initiatives. In 2019, for example, Marianne worked with the Egg Farmers of Ontario to develop trading cards that introduced the patient to the farmer that was supplying the hospital with egg products. Every day, a different egg product was featured on the menu, and patients were sent cards with information about the farmer, their operation, and product processing. Patient satisfaction surveys indicated a very positive response; patients were impressed with the initiative, felt they were learning something new, and enjoyed seeing local foods on the menu.

HHS is well on its way of achieving Marianne’s goal of 50% local food procurement. In reflecting on the team’s success to date, Marianne notes that HHS’s size has been an advantage. As a healthcare organization comprised of three hospitals, HHS makes a high volume of purchases. While many of these are managed by group purchasing organizations (GPO contracts), there are some key food categories that are not covered by GPO contracts, including produce and fresh protein. Marianne refers to these categories as “quick wins” in efforts to increase the proportion of local foods, but notes that high volume purchasing is helpful in negotiating with local vendors.

While environmental sustainability has never explicitly been included in the project guidelines, Marianne sees it as a by-product of HHS’s efforts to increase local food procurement:

*“We knew at the back of our mind that if we were going to be purchasing local, there was definitely going to be a benefit to the environment, [and] there was going to be a huge benefit to sustainability. [It wasn’t] ingrained or written into our goals, but we knew in the back of our mind that we were making an impact by doing that. We were also...supporting the economy as well in a positive way.”*

## Sources

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The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a large, black, serif font. Above the letter "a" is a small red maple leaf icon.