



Fundamentals of Sustainable Health Systems

Cases & Faces of Sustainable Healthcare

Hotspot: Food sustainability Case study: Plant-based, sustainable food within the Montefiore Health System (NY, USA)

Setting: Montefiore Health System

- Located in New York City and the Hudson Valley
- Serves over three million people
- Consists of 11 hospitals
- The majority of Montefiore's community-based primary care and specialty ambulatory services are provided in the Bronx, where 3/11 of its hospitals are located and from which 85% of its discharged patients hail
- The Bronx has higher than average rates of non-communicable diseases (heart disease, stroke, and diabetes) and food insecurity
- In 2009, Montefiore's mission became "To heal, to teach, to discover and to advance the health of the communities we serve," establishing its clear intention to serve as an anchor institution with the mandate/ability to improve community well-being
- Montefiore's Bronx-based Moses Campus (which has 800 beds and serves 2,800 meals/day to patients, visitors, and staff) has an institutional commitment to use its influence and resources to address community health through food service

Dr. Robert Ostfeld, a Montefiore cardiologist with an interest in the relationship between food choices and health, observed that a shift to a plant-based diet resulted in dramatic improvements in the health of his patients; they lost weight, gained energy, and had lowered cholesterol and blood pressure.

In an effort to encourage this shift in a larger patient population, Dr. Ostfeld worked with registered dietician Lauren Graf to establish the Montefiore Einstein Cardiac Wellness Program. This program teaches patients with (or at risk of developing) heart disease and type 2 diabetes about the benefits of replacing some or all of their meals with unprocessed plant-based foods (including vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, pulses, small amounts of nuts and avocado, and dairy alternatives), provides vegan meals to participants, and offers advice on healthy food purchasing and meal planning. Family members and friends are encouraged to attend the program's sessions so they can support the patient in improving their dietary nutrition when they return home.

Dr. Ostfeld's efforts have inspired a number of changes at Montefiore. After a 2010 food strategy update informed by his work, Montefiore's cafeterias –once home to sugary beverages and deep-fried foods – began to feature healthy and environmentally-friendly foods in their menus. Posters in the dining areas and patient brochures help educate staff, visitors, and patients about the health benefits of a plant-based diet. More recently, the Montefiore Einstein Cardiac Wellness Program collaborated with Montefiore's Department of Food and Nutrition Services to create "Heart Healthy Vegan" meal options for in-patients at five Montefiore hospitals, all of which feature the film *Forks over Knives*, a documentary espousing the health benefits of a plant-based diet, on patient entertainment systems. Montefiore now also holds "Meatless Mondays" on a weekly basis.

In order to improve access to the ingredients and skills required for a plant-based diet, the hospital food service department at Montefiore's Moses Campus holds weekly farmer's markets featuring food for sale, cooking demonstrations, and information about storing and preparing ingredients. The hospital also makes fresh fruits and vegetables available offsite through its "Green Carts" program, which sends carts offering these items for sale to surrounding neighborhoods with low levels of fruit and vegetable consumption.

These initiatives are geared toward improving "community health," but from Montefiore's perspective, this includes planetary as well as human health. Given the significant greenhouse gas emissions associated with livestock production, efforts to reduce the consumption of animal-products are seen as connected to Montefiore's desire to reduce its climate impact.

Montefiore's Energy and Sustainability Manager is working with Practice Greenhealth, Health Care Without Harm, and US Foods (Montefiore's food service distributor) to gather data that will help measure the extent of Montefiore's meat

reduction and any associated environmental impacts (initial data collection indicates less meat is being purchased, and costs are being saved). They are also working to determine which of the system's food ingredients are local and/or sustainable.

Complementary efforts to improve the sustainability of Montefiore's food service facilities include tracking cafeteria waste, composting food waste, installing biodigesters with the potential to transform waste into energy, and replacing plastic food containers with compostable alternatives. Montefiore's overarching goals in undertaking these various initiatives are to build community health, protect the environment, and increase access to fresh sustainable food.

Sources

Galaza, April. 2017. Hospital battles hunger and disease in the Bronx — with plants. Medium.com. <https://medium.com/@HCWH/hospital-battles-hunger-and-disease-in-the-bronx-with-plants-41145d45bfa8>

Olivian, Paola Hernández. 2019. Hospitals fighting climate change and disease with plants. Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) Blog. https://noharm-europe.org/articles/blog/europe/hospitals-fighting-climate-change-and-disease-plants?mc_cid=8c5ac0e900&mc_eid=432c75db31

Ostfeld, Robert. 2017. Montefiore Health System Now Plays Forks Over Knives and Serves Plant-Based Meals at Patient Beds. Forksoverknives.com. <https://www.forksoverknives.com/montefiore-health-system-plays-fok-and-serves-plant-based-vegan-meals/#gs.w8pyd9>

This project was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada.

Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada.

Canada 