

Bringing Healthy Foods into Michigan's Hospitals ~ Questions for Hillary Bisnett of the Ecology Center

(Hillary Bisnett is the Ecology Center's Healthy Food in Health Care Coordinator. She grew up on a family farm, and received a BS in Sustainable Business from Aquinas College in Grand Rapids. Before coming to the Ecology Center, she worked at a hospital in Grand Rapids, where she started a farmers market, created sustainability education materials and monitored storm water runoff from green roof and rain gardens. Hillary also served on the Executive Board of the Greater Grand Rapids Food System Council. She's been at the Ecology Center since April 2009.)

Bill Zirinsky: Hillary, you are the Ecology Center's Healthy Food in Health Care Coordinator. Right now you're very involved with trying to bring healthy food into hospital systems and support sustainable food systems. Give us a brief overview of this program.

Hillary Bisnett: Our program works with hospitals across the state that are interested in purchasing locally and sustainably-produced foods for their patients and staff. Health care facilities are recognizing that our entire food system – the way our food is produced and distributed – is misaligned with dietary guidelines, and is largely reliant on methods of production and distribution that harm public and environmental health.

Hospitals around the country have been signing a "healthy food pledge". What is it? Is hospital participation growing in Michigan?

The pledge commits hospitals to implement policies and programs that demonstrate a commitment to a food procurement system that is based on the Hippocratic Oath of "first, do no harm." The philosophy of the pledge is to consider food and its production and distribution as preventative medicine that can protect the health of patients, staff and communities. The pledge has helped hospitals demonstrate leadership by sending a strong signal to the marketplace encouraging local, nutritious, sustainable food production, and by modeling healthy food practices for patients and the community.

To date, over 300 hospitals across the nation have signed the pledge including 28 facilities in Michigan. Just two years ago, only three hospitals were participating in our state.

BZ: Hospitals have been hosting farmers markets. How many in Michigan? Tell us more.

Bisnett: More than ten Michigan hospitals hosted a market last year and many have expressed interest in hosting one next year. Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo and Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital even host indoor winter markets. This has been a great way for hospitals to provide a service to patients, employees and visitors, while supporting local food producers. As many communities have limited access to fresh produce, it's logical for hospitals to want to provide a foundation for good health: good food. Hospitals are in a unique position to both treat diet-related illnesses and address their root causes by hosting a farmer's market. Markets also strengthen staff morale, while increasing the likelihood that patients, visitors, and

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staff will eat nutritious fresh foods. They are also a fun venue for educating about nutrition, food preparation and the benefits of eating fresh and local, all of which further contribute to the long-term development of healthy eating habits. Additionally, this provides another avenue for family farmers to sell directly to the public, often resulting in farmers receiving a fair wage and food dollars staying in the local economy.

BZ: What's been happening in southeast Michigan?

Bisnett: We have a leader in Washtenaw County -- Joseph Mercy Hospital! In April 2010, St. Joseph installed a hoop house and prepared a few acres of land for growing vegetables. In early September, a second hoop house was built. This is 'phase one' of a long-term plan, according to 'Farmer Dan' Bair, the farm manager for St. Joseph. The current focus is providing produce to the hospital's farmer's market, with a goal to farm up to thirty acres to supply patient and cafeteria meals.

St. Joe's CEO Rob Casalou's hope of a paradigm shift, not only for his hospital, but also for the health care sector at large, aligns nicely with their reason for signing the Healthy Food Pledge and onsite food production. He's been quoted saying, "When people think of St. Joe's, they're thinking of sick care, but we're really a health provider. So we decided to take a significant part of our land and turn it into production for health and wellness."



A hoop house at St. Joe's Hospital. In April 2010, St. Joe's installed a hoop house and prepared a few acres of land for growing vegetables. In early September, a second hoop house was built. This year, St. Joe's focused on growing tomatoes, peppers, herbs, flowers and pumpkins to supply their farmers market. As more hoop houses are constructed, plans will be developed to integrate the food into patient and cafeteria meals.

At the University of Michigan Hospital, they are sourcing nearly all of their dairy products from a farm in west Michigan while working to purchase compostable take-out containers as well as working to increase local produce purchases. Allegiance Health in Jackson has been in conversations with a new farmer co-op hoping to supply two institutions in their area. Also, the Henry Ford Health System partnered with Detroit's Eastern Market to host a traveling farm stand throughout the health system while piloting an employee CSA (community supported agriculture) program at their administrative building – to increase the amount of fresh produce their employees take home – to encourage healthy eating habits among employees. These are just a few examples in southeast Michigan.

BZ: Can you tell us about the Michigan Healthy Food Workgroup? How many hospitals participate? What was their most recent project and how is the Ecology Center involved?

Bisnett: The Michigan Healthy Food Work Group is an advisory subcommittee of the Michigan Hospital Association's Michigan Green Healthcare Committee. Currently, there are nineteen hospital members who have committed to collaborating on healthy food initiatives, and to leveraging their purchasing power to support local, sustainable food. Starting in April 2010, the committee recognized the amount of expertise in the state already, and felt meetings should include peer-to-peer learning. Participating hospitals also collaborate on a yearly healthy food initiative. Last year's focus was on the Michigan Apple Campaign, an initiative to create a baseline of Michigan apple purchases and to demonstrably increase these purchases the following year. The Ecology Center's role has been to facilitate the work of the Michigan Healthy Food Work Group.

BZ: What's the Ecology Center's vision for this work over the next few years?

Bisnett: We will continue to support the purchase of sustainable foods in the health care sector, but we also hope to expand our work to clinician education. We see many benefits in working with health care clinicians as they play a vital role in educating their patients, community and

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institutions. Clinicians are recognized as trusted experts and have an influential role, not only in the clinic, but in society as well. Our focus will be on talking about the interconnections between our entire food system and our health, and advocating for clinician involvement in interventions that can be considered true prevention. We also hope to work with regional food distributors to increase their offerings of sustainable, local food.

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