Catalyzing Health Care Investment in Healthier Food Systems

Health Care Without Harm & the Healthy Food in Health Care Program

For twenty years, Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) has worked to transform the health sector worldwide, without compromising patient safety or care, so that it becomes ecologically sustainable and a leading advocate for environmental health and justice. HCWH is now leading the healthcare sector in moving beyond doing “less harm”—reducing negative impacts from the design and operation of healthcare—to a future where the sector “heals” or restores ecological, economic and social capital within communities.

Health Care Without Harm’s Healthy Food in Health Care (HFHC) Program, launched in 2005, catalyzes the purchasing power, expertise, and voice of the healthcare sector to advance the development of a healthy and sustainable food system. HFHC utilizes an Environmental Nutrition framework, which asserts that healthy food cannot be defined by nutritional quality alone. It is the end result of a food system that conserves and renews natural resources, advances social justice and animal welfare, builds community wealth, and fulfills the food and nutrition needs of all eaters now and into the future.

As anchor institutions, hospitals are embracing a commitment to apply their social and economic influence and intellectual resources to better the long-term public and environmental health of their communities. They are
rooted in place, hold significant investments in real estate and social capital, and are among the largest employers in their communities. Due to their significant purchasing power and trusted role as authorities on health and wellness, hospitals have an important opportunity to not only increase access to healthier, more sustainably produced food for patients, staff and the community, but to transform the food system toward greater health and sustainability through local sourcing of goods and services and strategic investments.

As places of healing, hospitals have a mission-driven incentive to purchase and serve food that’s healthy for people and the environment as well as invest in and support public policy for an equitable and sustainable food system. HFHC works nationally and through regional innovation projects (currently in the Northwest, California, New England, the Mid-Atlantic and Michigan) with hospitals to embrace their anchor status to build a sustainable food system that improves public and environmental health.

**Project Overview: Catalyzing Community Benefit Investment in Healthier Food Systems**

In the US, diet-related diseases are crippling families and communities by driving up unsustainable medical costs and setting up our young people for a lifetime of health problems. At the same time, our dysfunctional food production, distribution, and consumption systems result in both food insecurity and overweight and obesity, particularly for vulnerable communities.

Several provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) sought to promote an important shift in focus for the US healthcare community—from treating sickness and disease to promoting prevention and wellness. Recent changes under the ACA to IRS regulations governing the community benefit obligations of tax-exempt hospitals build on a movement by health industry leaders to promote greater community engagement and a population health orientation in community benefit practices. There is now a powerful new opportunity for non-profit hospitals to collaborate with other stakeholders to implement community health improvement plans that address social determinants of health such as housing, environmental and safety conditions, and the availability of quality, affordable food.

In this three-year project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Health Care Without Harm will undertake a national study of non-profit hospitals’ community benefit practices targeted to strengthening food system resilience and sustainability, improving physical and economic access to healthy foods, and promoting healthier dietary patterns and healthy body weight. The study will identify best hospital community benefit practices and model programs.

The project will engage hospitals and other stakeholders to strengthen collaboration for and commitment to community health improvement. This will include developing and disseminating tools and resources to support replication of best practices for Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs), community benefit implementation strategies, and community partnerships, as well as providing national, regional and virtual forums for the community benefit community and allied organizations to learn and accelerate best practices to promote healthy food access and healthier food systems.

**National Community Benefit Study**

HCWH is conducting a national research study to investigate the landscape of tax-exempt hospitals’ community benefit activities to improve healthy food access, promote healthier food systems, and reduce risk of diet-related health conditions. The research will include:

- A national survey of tax-exempt hospitals’ community benefit directors
- 90+ in-depth research interviews with community benefit professionals, public health officials, and other key informants
- Analysis of 200+ CHNAs and community benefit implementation strategies
- 12 case studies of model community benefit programs

The study’s principal research questions will examine:
- To what extent are facilities integrating assessment of healthy food access, food environments, and diet-related disease in their CHNAs?
- How are facilities across the country using their community benefit resources to improve access to healthy food, promote healthier food environments, and reduce risk of diet-related disease?
- How are healthy food access and diet-related disease community benefit programs being evaluated?
- What are facilitators and obstacles to community benefit programming to improve healthy food access and strengthen local food systems?

HCWH will share research findings through a variety of venues, including conferences and forums for community benefit, public health, and community development professionals.

**Community Benefit Tools and Resources**

The national research will inform the development of a variety of tools and resources to help facilities address healthy food access and diet-related disease in their CHNAs and community benefit implementation strategies. These will include research reports and a series of issue briefs, guidance documents, case studies, and links to other resources to support community health improvement initiatives. These will provide examples highlighting lessons learned and best practices for promoting health equity, program design, program implementation, establishing community partnerships, achieving sustainable financing, program evaluation, and how to include support for local, sustainable food systems in community benefit programming.

**Demonstration of Model Programs**

HCWH will showcase and expand its network of hospitals engaged in promoting access to healthy and sustainable food, including enhancing their community benefit work to improve healthy food access and support healthier food systems.

- **Demonstrating Innovation** - HCWH will work with our hospital and health system partners to contribute to the national community benefit research, demonstrate best community benefit practices, and provide other resources to aid in replication.

- **Expanding HFHC Program to Include New Regions and Underserved Populations** - HCWH will work with healthcare and organizational partners to expand engagement in geographic regions where needs and
opportunities for successful community benefit food system investment are identified. Expansion efforts will focus on rural communities, low-income and minority communities, and programs targeting childhood obesity prevention in the Southwest and Southeast regions of the U.S.

**Peer to Peer Learning & Accelerating Best Practice**

HCWH will organize gatherings and networks to develop an understanding of leading and innovative community benefit programming and disseminate findings to support best practices in CHNAs, collaborating with community stakeholders, implementation plans, program evaluation, and other community benefit activities to promote healthy food access and support healthier food environments.

**Gatherings to Learn and Accelerate Change**

- **Innovators Workshop** - In 2017, HCWH will bring together individuals from healthcare, community benefit, public health, and food and nutrition advocacy organizations for a working meeting to digest preliminary findings, provide input to support the development of guidance tools and resources, and plan tangible action steps for spread of the best practices.
- **National Convening** - In 2018, with the research study complete and accompanying resources developed, HCWH will host a two-day conference with national stakeholders engaged in the utilization of community benefit programming to improve healthy food access and promote healthier food systems. The conference will be an opportunity to showcase study findings and for community benefit officers to network.
- **Regional Roundtables** - Regional forums will provide networking opportunities for community benefit staff, hospital administrators, clinicians, food service operators, and community based organizations. Study findings, case studies, and guidance materials and tools will be shared.
- **National Webinar Series** - In 2018, a three-part webinar series will share with community benefit professionals and public health and food systems advocates the study findings and associated tool kit.

**Learning and Action Networks**

- **National Learning Network** – Composed of participants from the convenings who express interest in continuing to participate in a learning and innovation community, a peer to peer network will be developed and supported through virtual platforms.
- **Regional Action Networks** – Regional networks composed of community benefit professionals, clinicians, hospital food service professionals and community organizations will be developed to creatively address opportunities for community benefit investing in their communities.
- **Supporting Replication Nationally through Key Partnerships** - In the third year of the project HCWH will draw on our research and guidance resources, as well as collaboration with other organizations working on community health and food systems, to support replication of best community benefit practices to improve healthy food access and promote healthier food environments. HCWH will provide education, resources and technical assistance through key partnerships.

To learn more and become involved, please contact:
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