

Children's Mercy Hospital — *Kansas City*

“People make food choices based on foods readily available to them,” said Karen Cox, Executive Vice President and Co-Chief Operating Officer of Children's Mercy Hospital. “As a leader in children's health care, and a major employer in the Kansas City area, Children's Mercy is making the healthy choice the easy choice for our patients, families, and employees.” To do this, they signed up for Partnership for Healthier America's (PHA) Hospital Healthier Food Initiative (HHFI) in January 2013.

Goals

From the beginning, Children's Mercy hoped the initiative would have a positive ripple effect on the Kansas City community. By improving the hospital's food options, they hoped to encourage patients' families and hospital employees to make similar changes at home. Ultimately, they hoped these changes would result in chronic disease reduction, reduced healthcare costs, and fewer employee sick days.



45 cal.



136 cal.



50 cal.

Implementation

Their first order of business involved securing support from senior hospital management. With the Executive Vice President as an advocate, a proposal was developed and delivered to senior management, which received unanimous support.

The next step focused on assembling the right team. A dietitian was brought on as the Quality Control Coordinator to oversee logistical tasks including researching healthier food alternatives, determining which alternatives were compliant and would appeal

to customers, ensuring accurate labeling, and directing promotional activities. A chef was also hired to oversee meal development.

Since policies were already underway to satisfy many HHFI commitment elements, implementation began by focusing on these “low-hanging fruit.” Some of the first elements to be completed were the exclusive display of health-promoting advertisements, offering at least one wellness meal on the cafeteria and general patient menu daily, displaying

health promoting foods close to registers, and offering at least one children's wellness meal on the cafeteria and pediatric menus daily. Children's Mercy even went beyond the commitment by stopping the sale of sugary beverages.

Next, they focused on high priority items. These included labeling food with calories per serving, adding more wellness meals, allocating a greater portion of their budget to fresh fruits and vegetables, eliminating deep fat

fryers and fried foods, and offering more low-sodium, whole grain, and nonfat/low-fat dairy products.

To keep the initiative exciting for cafeteria patrons, the food service team updates the menu every five weeks, and holds taste-tests to introduce new menu options. The cafeteria also offers special discounts on healthier foods. Collectively, these efforts have helped the cafeteria retain customers and maintain sales.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Implementing a program like this, at a hospital that serves over 20,000 meals a week, has been challenging. The misperception that healthy food is unappealing can threaten the sustainability of a healthy dining program. Children's Mercy anticipated and addressed this concern with a few strategies.

One strategy involved changing their approach to menu development. As Bill Barkley, General Manager & Food Service Director, noted, "You have to be very creative... it's a different way of developing a menu because you're starting out with what the nutritional profile is as opposed to cooking food and then analyzing it for [its nutritional value]." This takes time, but it paid off because the meals are considered to be "restaurant quality."

There were also tough choices to make about what would and wouldn't appear on the

new menu. Two items that have been particularly challenging to eliminate have been sugar-sweetened beverages and fried foods. Cafeteria patrons were accustomed to these items, so some complaints came in once they were removed.

To address the complaints, healthier beverages are made readily available, and the hospital shares information about the negative health effects of sugar-sweetened beverages using information cards and team huddles. With regards to fried foods, senior management provided funding to purchase cafeteria equipment to alternatively prepare foods. Special events and celebrations still prove challenging, however. Since people are accustomed to having sweets during celebrations, the hospital offers healthier choices to compliment more traditional fare.

Keys to Success

Overall, the program has been a success because the implementation team secured corporate buy-in from the beginning, delegated tasks to staff members, and regularly communicated the importance of the program to hospital

employees. Management and staff at Children's Mercy recognize that small changes matter. Ultimately, it's not a race they say; it's about sustainable changes that will improve the well-being of the Kansas City community at large.