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THE ABC'S OF HEALTHCARE FOODSERVICE WASTE MANAGEMENT

By Andrew Shakman, President, CEO LeanPath (excerpted from an article in FCSI's The Consultant)


Once upon a time, waste management was not a high priority for healthcare foodservice directors. Other departments took the lead and foodservice didn't spend much time thinking it. But now that is changing in dramatic ways.

According to data collected by LeanPath and our clients, 4-10 percent of the food purchased in healthcare ultimately becomes kitchen waste before ever reaching a cafe customer, patient, physician, or staff. This is a staggering figure because it is not "post-consumer food waste" (aka "plate waste") that someone chose not to eat. Rather, it represents resources fully within the control of the food and nutrition department. This "pre-consumer food waste" (aka "kitchen waste"), represents one of the most compelling economic opportunities for healthcare foodservice operators looking to **reduce food costs**. By wasting less food to begin with, operators have the

ability to significantly reduce purchasing, inventories, utilities and labor costs associated with overproduction. Operators also have a major opportunity to impact disposal costs.

There are also meaningful **environmental** advantages to reducing food waste. The environmental footprint of food includes fuel for tractors, fertilizers, pesticides, carbon output from transportation, refrigeration, preparation, and hot-holding. By throwing away a simple "grab & go" sandwich, we sacrifice the entire upstream environmental footprint required to bring that item to our operation. There are also profound downstream consequences from food waste as these organic materials find their way to landfills, decompose anaerobically, and produce methane which is a potent greenhouse gas.





So what can healthcare foodservice directors do to manage food waste more effectively? The first place to start is with the Food Waste Management Hierarchy:

“Reduce” Source Food Waste

“Reuse” Food Waste On-Site or through Donations to People

“Reuse” Food Waste through Donations to Animals

“Recycle” Food Waste in Industrial Uses

“Recycle” Food Waste as Compost

“Dispose”

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The hierarchy reminds us that healthcare foodservice directors should start with source reduction of waste, look at donation opportunities second, examine industrial and composting uses third, and seek more efficient and environmentally appropriate methods of disposal as the final option.

Notably, among those healthcare operators who are actively managing food waste, there is one common blind spot: composting. Composting is tangible and valuable, but source-reduction has a much higher impact and tends to earn scant attention. Operators would be wise to review the hierarchy and allocate greater attention and resources to source reduction since it offers the greatest opportunity for financial savings and is highly actionable. Focusing on the bottom of the hierarchy first is like coming into a flooded kitchen and looking for a mop. We all know we need to stop the source of the leak first before transitioning to clean-up mode. The same approach of “starting with stopping” should be applied to the food waste “leak” in healthcare foodservice operations.

In the following sections, we will review strategies at each stage of the waste management hierarchy.

PRE-CONSUMER FOOD WASTE STRATEGIES

Source Reduction.

If you want to reduce pre-consumer food waste at the source, you must track it every day in enough detail to diagnose root causes. As the tracking process becomes a normal operating procedure, it will drive staff awareness and allow managers to identify the recurring sources of food waste (e.g. late trays, salad bars, soups, etc.). Managers will establish waste baselines, compare benchmarks, and set specific goals for improvement, inevitably leading to significant reductions in waste. The tracking can be done either with a paper sheet or using an automated food waste tracking system. Remember—we manage the things we measure.

It's important to make this a permanent process because—with turnover in staff and management, menu changes and new programs—nothing is ever static in a foodservice operation. Also, tracking requires very little staff time, but it makes a big difference.

Reuse.

After minimizing as much waste as possible, the next alternative is reuse.

Managers should establish a formal reuse review policy. This requires that the senior culinary worker on duty review leftovers within the strict parameters of the policy, food safety standards and all regulatory requirements.

Some items will be retained through this process and there may be an opportunity to anticipate this opportunity by structuring menus in subsequent days to employ these resources.

If the food cannot be used at the healthcare facility, donation is the next best solution. Operators can work directly with a local agency or reach out to an organization such as Food Donation Connection (www.foodtodonate.com), which will coordinate the process and file the appropriate forms to bring extra tax benefits to for-profit facilities. Many managers don't know that these tax benefits may exceed the cost of the product and are worth pursuing for economic reasons, in addition to making a difference in their community.

If reuse for the benefit of human beings is not feasible, it may be possible to donate leftover kitchen waste to swine operations. This requires special handling by the farmer to comply with the Swine Health Protection Act in the U.S. and may be a good option for some facilities.

Recycling for Industrial Uses.

Yellow grease may be collected or sold to a bio-fuels operation that will convert it into bio-diesel. There may also be opportunities to convert food waste to energy at a dedicated facility. And, in some communities with appropriate infrastructure, it may be preferable to send food waste through a garbage disposer and into the municipal sewer system. In these regions, food can travel through the sewer system and be converted into energy at the Waste Water Treatment Plant. This approach saves hauling costs and environmental impacts.

POST-CONSUMER FOOD WASTE STRATEGIES

Source Reduction.

Café portion control is a primary reduction strategy for post-consumer food waste. By sizing portions correctly, less food will be wasted by café customers. However, not all operators will choose to pursue this due to value perceptions by customers.

Guest education is another common source reduction strategy. By periodically auditing post-consumer waste, the operator may post information that shows the magnitude of the problem and encourage guests to take only food they will consume.

Reuse.

Human reuse is not viable with post-consumer waste. Animal reuse may be possible depending on the jurisdiction, regulations and how the waste will be pre-processed by the agricultural user.

STRATEGIES APPLICABLE TO BOTH PRE- AND POST-CONSUMER FOOD WASTE

"Recycling" via Composting.

If waste cannot be minimized or reused, composting offers a very compelling opportunity to divert waste from landfill. Composting produces a useful soil amendment that returns nutrients to the earth. It also has a much better carbon footprint than landfills because the organic matter breaks down aerobically and produces mostly CO₂ instead of the more-potent methane that comes from landfill anaerobic digestion.

The first step for a healthcare foodservice operator considering composting is to review local infrastructure options. Some communities have excellent composting and hauling resources and others have few alternatives. The website www.findacomposter.com can help locate these resources. Off-site commercial composting facilities offer advantages because they have scale, expertise and channels to market their compost product that most operators do not.

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Composting costs vary greatly by region but may be less costly than garbage hauling in some communities. If no off-site composting exists or is planned, the operator may consider on-site composting options if their space, labor and technical skills allow.

Pre-consumer food waste is the easiest waste stream to target initially for composting. The operator controls this waste therefore the risk of contamination is low and the ease of collection quite easy. An operator must be careful to educate kitchen staff to continue source reduction of kitchen waste: many will think that just because they are composting, they can dispose whatever they want. This still costs money in purchasing, labor and utilities. Post-consumer composting becomes more complex because there is risk of contamination, with guests throwing non-compostable items in the compost bin. One solution is to have properly trained staff clear trays and scrap plates correctly. If guests must deposit the items, it's critical to offer educational signage with pictures next to each clearly-marked compost bin.

In addition to food waste, compostable disposables (e.g., plates, cups and cutlery) can be included with the post-consumer compost. However, guest education on disposal procedures is important. For example guests could easily mistake a corn compostable cup for its plastic, non-compostable cousin, so it's important to look for compostable ware that is easily-identifiable by the guest and post proper signage.

Healthcare foodservice operators should also remember that using compostable disposables without having a collection method to get those items back to a commercial composting facility is an incomplete solution. Those disposables—which come at higher cost in most cases—will be replacing petroleum-based disposables (which is generally a good thing) but if they end up in a municipal solid waste stream the full benefit will be lost. In a landfill, these items will usually not compost and will likely generate methane.

Disposal.

If waste cannot be reduced, reused, recycled or composted, then it will be disposed. This article cannot cover the full range of dehydrator, digester, disposer, scrap collector, and pulper options available. However, it is important to consider how these well-known solutions interact with new technologies. For example, pulping prior to composting is preferred by many operators because it reduces water and macerates the product in a way that accelerates composting. Some commercial composters push back on this, however, because it's difficult to detect contamination (plastic service-ware, for example) visually in a pulped compost product. In general, reducing the volume and weight of food waste makes it easier to haul and can lead to cost and environmental benefits for operators.

Conclusion.

Foodservice waste management practices are evolving regularly and healthcare foodservice directors need to stay focused on this area. The economic and environmental profile of waste will make it a top priority for AHF members of the future—and now is the time to test and learn.

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