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## Veterans Affairs Medical Center Implements Pilot Program to Incorporate Locally Grown Food into Foodservice Operation

MARTINSBURG, WEST VIRGINIA

The Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center is the largest integrated health care system in the United States. It is composed of 157 medical centers, 860 outpatient clinics and serves 5.5 million veterans annually. In Martinsburg, West Virginia, an average of 1,550 meals are served per day in the VA's two foodservice facilities. Therefore, the VA Medical Center represents a significant market for food vendors and wields an enormous, if indirect, influence over the food system and the decisions of agricultural producers.

In 2006, the chief of the VA Medical Center implemented a sustainable kitchen project. While limited in scope, the program was well received by patients and staff, and the participating farmers were pleased to have a new market opportunity.

In the past five years, a few hospitals have taken the lead in offering locally grown fresh foods in their foodservice operations. These hospitals have developed programs such as in-house farmers' markets and purchasing guidelines that incorporate seasonal produce.



The VA Medical Center became inspired by the stories about sustainable food projects in hospitals, colleges and schools around the country. In 2006, the organization began a three-month pilot program to purchase fresh, organic produce from a local grower. The pilot started out great, with fresh produce being delivered on Tuesday mornings. The VA Medical Center locally purchased lettuce, mesclun mix, cabbage, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, peaches, apples, pears, melon and beef.

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Farmers' markets have been established in response to increasing consumer demand. Smaller-scale growers do not have the economy of scale of 1,000-acre commodity farms that would enable them to deliver a steady supply of uniformly graded, inexpensive produce. However, small farmers offer the advantage of freshly harvested produce that is higher in nutrients and tastier than produce shipped from other regions. They also offer the flexibility and motivation to produce the quality and variety of crops preferred by the foodservice operations.

In addition to implementing a Farm-to-Fork program, the VA Medical Center's administrative dietitian team explored other ways to increase the sustainability of the kitchen operation. The hospital contacted a local composter to explore the possibilities of diverting pre-consumer waste to his facility. They also reviewed menus with regard to sustainable fisheries and researched sources for biodegradable eating utensils.

A Hobart FT900S warewasher was installed to decrease energy and water usage, and a Hobart WPS1200 food pulper was purchased to reduce the volume of food in the waste stream. Overall, the food pulper trimmed the daily waste volume from an average of 890 pounds to 200 pounds. The estimated cost for waste removal was cut back from \$102 per day to \$25 a day, or about \$28,000 annually. With that annual reduction, the pulper will pay for itself in less than a year.

The Farm-to-Fork program was implemented over a three-month period in collaboration with a nearby organic grower. A total of \$1,500 was budgeted for the food purchase. Food purchases are monitored regularly as a whole to stay within the monthly budget. This permits the flexibility to substitute lower-cost menu items for more expensive items for special occasions. Customer feedback on the fresh produce and beef was overwhelmingly positive. Staff and customers praised the efforts to support local farms.

Unfortunately, the sustainable kitchen project was put on hold because it was too demanding to support on top of the normal, ongoing workload. Currently, the VA is establishing collaboration with partners from USDA's Resource Conservation and Development program and Shepherd University's Environmental Studies program to re-establish and expand the sustainable kitchen project.

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In the winter of 2007, the project plans to resume operation. Over the next two years, the VA Medical Center, with the help of project partners, hopes to develop the project further and continue to implement energy and waste conservation strategies. Another goal is to increase the volume of locally grown and organic or sustainably produced food in the VA foodservice during the growing season by 10 percent by the end of the second year.

As the VA Medical Center works to re-establish the sustainable kitchen project, the local press and media outlets will be notified. In addition, local economic development officials and agricultural organizations will be informed of the project and invited to observe its progress.