

# Growing Grassroots Green Teams

By Shannon Bunsen and James Harrod

**A**t UW Health, the University of Wisconsin-Madison's integrated health system, environmental sustainability is part of our mission for social responsibility—doing what is best for the communities we serve. We recognize that sustainability is not only good for the community, but for the institution as well. It can be a mechanism for transforming culture and achieving organizational success that can benefit everyone. We also recognize the influential power of passionate change agents, and we're reaping the benefits of tapping into that power.

Our sustainability committee and subsequent programs started as grassroots efforts; they were formed in response to staff's recognition of an unmet need. Progress has been made primarily due to our employees' desire to create a healthier and more environmentally sound UW Health community.

The first seed was planted in 2009, when three UW Health employees created an initiative to promote sustainable practices at our University Hospital, using Earth Day as their platform. Over time, the group expanded its efforts, scope, and presence by meeting with department leaders to build support and recruit members.

In 2011, the Green Team program was given the charge to expand sustainability efforts to other UW Health facilities. All employees were invited to get involved if they were interested and able. The program was facilitated by visiting clinic managers, surveying interest among their staff, and scheduling a kickoff meeting. In 2014, we changed our strategy and sent an e-mail to all directors and managers, inviting them to encourage their staff to start a Green Team. We now have more than 20 teams, with a goal of having at least one at every UW Health location.



## WHAT ARE GREEN TEAMS?

Green Teams are groups of employees who work together to introduce sustainability to their workplace and improve current practices or processes. They are the champions for sustainability and encourage environmentally conscious behaviors among colleagues each and every day. The purpose behind these groups is to provide an outlet for change agents, inspire new ideas, increase efficiency and reduce waste, engage staff and develop leaders, have fun, and contribute to our culture of sustainability. New teams attend an orientation in their area where they are introduced to project examples, available resources, and tips on how to be an effective team. Although the specific function of a Green Team is flexible and can take on different roles in the organization, all teams start out by evaluating the current state of their workplace and by performing surveys, trash audits, and recycling rounds. Establishing a baseline has led to projects such as break room composting, employee gardens, and energy improvements.

Some teams are multidisciplinary, such as our perioperative team; they are working to reduce the



The UW Health Green Teams at work.



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environmental footprint of operating room waste and anesthesia waste gas through education and simple changes in practice. Another team is made up of nurses on a single unit who bring photos of nature into the hospital for the benefit of their oncology patients. Many of our clinic teams hold donation events where staff can drop off unused items that can benefit someone else. Green Team projects may be site-specific or spread across the entire organization, such as the automated double-sided printing initiative. The ideas are endless.

#### HOW TO CREATE A GREEN TEAM

To help your Green Team be successful, we offer the following tips:

- It starts with ensuring management support; if you can connect sustainability work to the organization's mission and strategic goals, you will get leadership buy-in. You should also be specific about what you are seeking. For example, say that you need support for dedicating X work hours per month to Green Team efforts. By including a manager on the team, you can streamline the decision-making and approval process.
  - Invite all employees to participate by utilizing existing communication avenues paired with some strategic recruitment tools, such as personal invitations to existing environmental stewards.
  - Have clearly defined roles for participants based on *how they want to contribute and what skillsets they possess*. Be mindful that you do not let all responsibilities fall on the leaders so that sustainability work becomes a burden to them.
- Engage partner resources such as those offered by your city or local nonprofits.
  - Meet regularly, and when time is a barrier, consider lunch meetings or a less frequent meeting schedule.
  - Pursue low- or no-cost projects first to prove their efficacy. Try setting up a sustainability budget by reclaiming funds from programs that incentivize energy efficiency work.
  - It is imperative that Green Teams measure the impact of their efforts whenever possible, and remember that failure to achieve perfection should not prevent progress. When goals are met, celebration should follow.
  - Consistent communications should be maintained with each other and the rest of the workforce—and *message delivery is just as important as content*. As champions of sustainability efforts, Green Teams are interacting with and influencing others directly every day. While many people are keen to jump on board with green practices, others may be apprehensive and resistant to change. We encourage Green Teams to keep the following in mind:
    - » *Know your audience*. Think about what is important to each person and try to frame the benefits of sustainability appropriately. When talking to your finance department, highlight the cost savings of your sustainability work. A person with children may react better to understanding that sustainability is a responsibility to the next generation.
    - » *Commitment leads to action*. Awareness and

education alone do not change behaviors. People who commit to an action are more likely to follow through on it, so ask for a commitment. It could be as simple as turning off computer monitors each night.

- » *Keep it simple.* People are more likely to engage in green practices when it's easy to understand and convenient. If you tell them too much, they will do nothing. For example, rather than posting a long list of recyclables, try to highlight a different item each week.
- » *Explain the why.* Behavior changes occur when people understand how the benefits outweigh the barriers, and how the benefits can affect their lives and community.
- » *Recognition goes a long way.* Interpersonal communications and social norms *do* have the power to influence behavior, and people are more motivated by love than by fear. Provide positive reinforcement for being a sustainability champion.

At UW Health, we recognize that sustainability work is part of everything we do; it is not in addition to our jobs, but rather *how* we do our jobs. If we look through a lens of sustainability, we can evaluate how to do our daily work with a better environmental impact. Everyone contributes to our sustainability initiatives, as we all generate waste, use energy and water, make purchases, and engage in other decisions that affect environmental outcomes. We encourage our staff to find a meaningful connection to sustainability, whether it be a desire to protect the area's lakes or promote public health and wellness. We have made great progress in our sustainability efforts, but we still have a way to go. ☺

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