At Palomar Pomerado Health, going green is also saving the medical system a lot of green. Not only is Palomar Pomerado Health’s on-site shredding truck enabling the facility to handle its own document shredding, but it is also expected to save the medical system more than $840,000 over five years.

“We’re really trying to continue to make that connection between human health and the environment,” explains sustainability manager Barbara Hamilton. “If our mission is to promote health in the communities that we serve, then it’s also important that we follow the precautionary principle of ‘first do no harm.’ We have the opportunity to minimize our impact.

“Hospitals are typically the biggest waste producers in a community,” she notes. “So if we can find ways to reduce our waste, then we’re going to be able to reduce the health impact of all that transportation, fuel, and emissions to transport the material, as well as all of the environmental impacts of extracting natural resources. These things have a direct impact on human health.”

A similar scenario is playing out more than 2,000 miles away at the Medical University of South Carolina, where a comparable switch from an outside document shredding company to an on-site operation saved $100,000 in the first year alone — including the purchase of a shredding truck.

“It cost us less to buy the truck than we were spending on the contractor,” recalls sustainability manager Christine von Kolnitz Cooley.

Now, after running the on-site document shredding program since 2006, von Kolnitz Cooley is convinced more than ever that the switch was justified.

“I would say there is no contractor that could do what we do for the amount of money we do it for,” she says. “They could not match our price.”

The Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston includes a 750-bed medical center (teaching hospital) and six colleges that train...
Hospitals Save Big With On-Site Shred Trucks

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healthcare professionals. It is the oldest medical school in the South, having been founded in 1824. The Palomar Pomerado Health District is the largest hospital district in California, covering some 850-square miles in the northern San Diego County area. It includes the 319-bed Palomar Medical Center in Escondido, the 107-bed Pomerado Hospital in Poway and the planned 450-bed Palomar Medical Center West in Escondido, which is under construction and slated to open in 2012.

What both medical complexes share in common, other than the patient care for which they are known, is a move from outsourcing document shredding to handling the job on-site. After shredding documents, both medical complexes sell the material to paper dealers. Medical University of South Carolina has taken in as much as $50,000 a year in paper sales; Palomar Pomerado Health is on track to take in some $20,000 this year for paper alone.

“The real key . . . to the success of the program is the avoided costs of outsourcing,” Hamilton says. “That's where the real savings come in. If we were just making money on selling the paper, we wouldn't be able to fund the program.”

Recycling is nothing new at MUSC, which has had a program in place since the early 1990s. Since then, its recycling rate has grown from 1.4 percent to 27 percent, slightly below the state's goal of 30 percent.

While items such as glass, plastics, aluminum and steel cans, electronic waste, batteries, mobile phones, medical products (excluding medical waste), toner cartridges and yard waste are all part of the recycling mix, it is paper which is far and away the largest generated item, according to von Kolnitz Cooley.

She estimates the medical facility — both on-campus and satellite medical clinics — generates some 20,000 pounds of paper each week.

Initially, an outside vendor would collect paper that had been placed in enclosed 45-, 65- or 95-gallon locked bins. Most of those papers were medical-related documents that MUSC wanted destroyed to comply with the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

The HIPAA Privacy Rule established national standards to protect individuals' medical records and other personal health information. Among other things, the government requires "appropriate safeguards to protect the privacy of personal health information, and sets limits and conditions on the uses and disclosures that may be made of such information without patient authorization."

"HIPAA was a major driver for shredding with a contractor," von Kolnitz Cooley says. But, she adds, "The medical center was spending so much on the outside contractor that it made economic sense just to buy our own truck."

After contacting companies that manufactured and sold shredding vehicles — as well as getting sample bags of shredded paper to see the shred size — MUSC purchased a Vecoplan VST 32i shred truck. The truck was paid off in 18 months.

"We actually weren't surprised," von Kolnitz Cooley says of the $100,000 in savings in the first year of the on-site program. "It was clear that you could save that kind of money."

"A contractor may charge us anywhere from $40 to $60 to shred a bin depending on size,” she said.

Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC)
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“We’re actually beginning an analysis about adding more staff and possibly adding another truck,” Hamilton says. “We have a lot of physicians all around our various campuses who do business with PPH and who would like us to extend service to them.”

She agrees that HIPAA was a factor not only in the original document destruction scheme, but in bringing it in-house. Running the program on-site eliminated transportation issues and the chance for something to happen to the documents before they were shredded.

“All of our bins are locked,” she says, adding that only security officers and the shredding technicians have keys for access.

PPH also conducts a highly popular free monthly shredding event for the community.

Hamilton, who came to PPH in the fall of 2010 from her sustainability consulting firm, says the staff has embraced recycling. Both MUSC and PPH have green teams which advocate for sustainability.

“The staff is really into recycling,” Hamilton says. “It’s very tangible. An organization can be doing a lot of work behind the scenes trying to save energy and save water, but having those recycling bins out there really makes a big difference for the staff and people who visit the facility.”