

CASE STUDY



SUSTAINABILITY AS A QUALITY IMPERATIVE

In 2002, Virginia Mason Health System implemented its own “lean” or “kaizen” program by adapting the Toyota Production System to health care. The resulting Virginia Mason Production System is fully integrated into Virginia Mason’s culture. Employee engagement and respect for people are at the core of the production system, which relies on employees to facilitate process improvements. Every employee is expected to be a leader, and can stop work if there is a concern about quality, which includes patient safety. Every employee has the opportunity to contribute to quality improvement. In other words, “the employee who pushes the broom should be the one to select the broom.”

This commitment to quality extends to the focus on environmental sustainability. Sustainability is integrated into the everyday work along with patient safety and other organizational process improvement. One simple way that employees can engage in process improvement in their department is through the online “Everyday Lean Idea” system. Employees enter ideas into the system where ideas are tracked from start, testing, refinement and full implementation. The ideas that worked well are shared across the organization through the “Ideas Supermarket.” Recently, the organization added a “green idea” category for sustainability ideas. The “Everyday Lean and Green Ideas” are shared across the organization.

Another way employees are engaged is through Kaizen Events, during which a team of employees works together on a problem over two days. Every leader is trained in leading Kaizen Events and is expected to lead at least one per year. Virginia Mason’s sustainability Kaizen Events have included topics like hospital pharmaceutical waste management and missioning supplies from the OR.

Virginia Mason Health System

Virginia Mason Health System is recognized as one of the nation’s best health care facilities. Virginia Mason’s network of primary and specialty care medical centers and Virginia Mason Hospital & Seattle Medical Center offer superior treatment outcomes. They were the first organization to apply the principles of the Toyota Production System to health care, resulting in their own Virginia Mason Production System. Their Virginia Mason Institute consults internationally on these principles.

Virginia Mason’s award-winning environmental stewardship initiative, EnviroMason, is fully supported—from senior leadership to their team members. The Virginia Mason Production System helps them identify and implement sustainability initiatives. Their Green Team, made up of members from around the organization, supports—and often inspires—these efforts.



Examples of Lean & Green Ideas:

1. An employee handling insurance payments suggested a method to decrease paper agendas for weekly meetings that saved five reams of paper per year.
2. The Perioperative Services team noticed that the yellow socks that surgical patients wear were being thrown in the trash. These socks are wasted when they are needed by the local homeless population. The organization tested an idea to disinfect and donate the socks to the homeless, which resulted in approximately 12 pounds being donated weekly at approximately the same expense as throwing them in the landfill.

Challenges

1. Staff needs to be comfortable with change—Virginia Mason builds this into their job descriptions.
2. Balancing work load like taking care of patients is the core business, and this can seem peripheral to that.

3. Staff has to have respect for people, foster a safe environment for staff to share ideas, and they worked on establishing this culture.

Communication

Ongoing efforts include communications through communications department, intranet, the EnviroMason website, FAQs on recycling and composting guidelines for all sites, periodic training for green team, and ongoing accountability talking about leadership.

Measurable Outcomes

Because of this employee engagement, the Green Team is growing. It started with 10 total, and now there are 60 people who regularly participate. They always have at least 15-20 people attend the meetings, all engaged and working on projects, and Brenna Davis is there to support.

The Virginia Mason Production System helps them identify and implement waste reduction measures.