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EPP Case Study:

Compostable Coolers at Fairview Health Services

Topic:

Compostable Coolers for Patient Medication Deliveries

Organization:

Fairview Health Services

Fairview Health Services is a non-profit health system based in Minneapolis, Minnesota that includes 8 hospitals, more than 40 primary care clinics, and a wide range of specialty, home care and senior services. Fairview continually strives to improve the health of its communities by developing community benefit and outreach programs and other health services. Partnering with the University of Minnesota, Fairview supports research and education that can further its mission to provide exceptional clinical care and improve the health of the communities we serve.

Challenge:

Fairview Health Services ships temperature-sensitive medications to thousands of patients each year in its pharmacy services operations. For these shipments in the past, it has used specially designed coolers made of expanded polystyrene foam, a bulky material that is difficult to recycle. It was apparent that with very limited options, many patients became frustrated as they threw yet another cooler into the waste stream. As a result, many patients complained and asked for alternatives. Given that Fairview Health Services is committed to patient satisfaction, they began searching for an alternative product that would better serve patients and further its mission to improve the health of the community and environment.





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Aim/Goal:

- Improve patient satisfaction by providing an alternative to polystyrene coolers that is easy to dispose of in an environmentally friendly way
- Reduce the volume of polystyrene purchased by Fairview Health Services
- Maintain the highest standards for patient safety and Board of Pharmacy regulations for delivering temperature-sensitive medications

Team:

- Wesli Waters, Sustainability Coordinator, Fairview Health Services
- Crystal Saric, Sustainability Program Manager, Fairview Health Services
- Pat McDonough, Facilities Manager, Fairview Pharmacy Services
- Mark Lutcavish, Supervisor of Shipping and Receiving, Fairview Pharmacy Services
- StarchTech

Actions Taken:

As soon as Pat McDonough, facilities manager at Fairview Pharmacy Services, recognized that sending patients polystyrene coolers was becoming a problem, he reached out to Crystal Saric and Wesli Waters in Fairview's sustainability program for a solution. Together with Mark Lutcavish, Pharmacy Services, they formed a task force to research alternatives to polystyrene coolers by using outreach through Practice Greenhealth, contacting other hospitals in the area, and doing online research. The task force assembled a set of recommendations for alternatives that included reusable coolers, using reusable coolers through a returnable service, and certified compostable and biodegradable coolers.

The task force decided that the best option for Fairview was a compostable cooler, as the costs and procedures worked best with its pharmacy's existing medication packaging and delivery system. They chose a product available through StarchTech, which offers a compostable and biodegradable cooler made from cornstarch. The coolers degrade in 60 days or less in a moist soil environment and meet ASTM D6400-04 and D6868 standards for biodegradability. The coolers also are certified compostable in residential and commercial composting environments.

The coolers are comprised of six rectangular panels that must be assembled before use. The team brainstormed options for assembling the coolers, and partnered with Merrick, a local non-





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profit vocational center that employs adults with developmental disabilities. Extending the opportunity for green jobs was beneficial to both parties. Fairview completed its final phase of testing in November 2012 and began implementing the coolers across the board in January 2013.

Results:

- Elimination of 44,000 polystyrene coolers per year from the waste stream
- Creation of green jobs for adults with disabilities
- Improved patient satisfaction
- Minimal increase in materials and handling costs in exchange for substantial increase in patient satisfaction and environmental performance

Lessons Learned:

- This was a great opportunity to think “out of the box” for environmental improvement.
- It was a chance to be innovative while improving patient service and creating green jobs for adults with disabilities.
- Fairview is one of the first health systems to use biodegradable shipping coolers to deliver temperature-sensitive medication and is leading the way for other health systems to implement similar sustainability measures.

Next Steps:

- Fairview Health Services is exploring additional ways to use biodegradable/compostable materials in its operations and is encouraging other hospitals and pharmacies to consider utilizing biodegradable coolers for temperature-controlled shipping.

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