



Joan Plisko and Denise M. Choiniere, both with Maryland H2E, help hospitals go green and reduce waste.

## Hospitals see green as healthy for finances

### 1 GREEN POLICY

#### Maryland Hospitals for a Healthy Environment

**Executive director:** Barbara Sattler

**Technical director:** Joan Plisko

**Number of employees:** 5

**Why go green?** Because hospitals and health care providers owe it to the community and patients they serve to be conscious of the environment.

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Hospitals are the second-largest producers of waste behind the food industry. And their carbon footprint can be equal to that of a small town.

Yet when Barbara Sattler and Joan Plisko launched Maryland Hospitals for a Healthy Environment almost five years ago, they had to scour the state for hospital leaders willing to listen to their environmentally friendly pitch.

Things have changed since then. Now many hospital employees and executives recognize that everything from the slippers patients wear on their feet to the syringes and bags used to administer medications contribute to their facilities' massive waste.

As a result, the five employees of the so-called Maryland H2E initiative are having a difficult time keeping up with the demand for their technical expertise with energy audits and other green-related services. More than 50 hospitals and physician practices in the state have worked with Maryland H2E to become more green and cut down on the estimated 4 billion pounds of waste accrued by the industry nationwide each year.

Four health systems — LifeBridge Health, MedStar Health, Johns Hopkins Medicine and Western Maryland Health System — have formed sustainability teams with the help of Maryland H2E.

And another, the University of Maryland Medical System, is moving in that direction.

"I think it's the timing, it's the culture," said Denise M. Choiniere, a trained nurse who works part time for Maryland H2E and is the sustainability manager at the University of Maryland Medical Center. "Every business gets it now, and for hospitals, there's a financial incentive. It's health care's first responsibility to do no harm."

The greening of the health care industry is not exclusive to Maryland. By now, most states in the union have launched some sort of environmentally friendly initiative for hospitals and other health care providers.

And Maryland H2E's message is similar to those adopted by many other organizations nationwide: Reduce your waste and use of water, energy and pesticides. Eliminate products that contain mercury — including many thermometers — and other chemicals that could harm patients, and set in motion comprehensive recycling plans. Finally, focus on providing patients and staff with more healthy foods.

If a hospital can do that, Maryland H2E suggests, it will strengthen its relationship with the community, employee morale will soar, and the bottom line will improve.

"Your workers and patients will be happier and healthier, and that's what hospital leaders should be striving

for," said Plisko, whose organization is funded primarily by grants from the Abell Foundation, the Blaustein Philanthropic Group and the Kennedy Kreiger Foundation.

Still, there are obstacles to getting a sustainability program off the ground at a hospital. Recycling programs can be difficult to organize and operate effectively. And the cost of new energy-reduction systems can be a hurdle too high for some hospitals to clear. About one-third of Maryland's hospitals do not have a sustainability program in place.

"It's not business as usual," said Frank Weinberg, MedStar's vice president of facilities and a member of Maryland H2E's advisory board. "And it does take real money to make it happen."

That's where the Maryland Hospital Association hopes to help Maryland H2E. The two groups are developing a speakers bureau in which leaders of hospitals' so-called "green teams" travel the state to speak with administrators of the hospitals that don't have a sustainability program. They may also find a pocket of hospital employees who want to get the green movement going at that hospital.

"A lot of times you'll find that the champions of these movements aren't in the executive offices," said Frank Monius, the MHA's vice president of administration. "And nobody's twisting any arms here; it's sort of taken off like a rocket the past few years."