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The Ohio Hospital Association Empowers Hospitals to Prevent Pollution and Reduce Waste

By Karen Fuller

Ohio community hospitals have been moving forward rapidly since the Ohio Hospital Association (OHA) declared in 1998 that it would “wage a war against pollution and waste.”

The OHA became the leader in the fight with the Hospital Pollution Prevention (P2) Initiative. Through a partnership with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA), the OHA embarked on a cultural challenge that has changed the outlook of pollution prevention and waste reduction in the Ohio area. The focus of the agreement was threefold: “promote the elimination of mercury from hospitals, to reduce hospital waste stream volumes, and prevent pollution,” explains Rick Sites, general counsel for the Ohio Hospital Association.

The outcome of the effort has brought more than pollution and waste reduction awareness. “Pollution prevention and waste reduction creates a culture” that more than 50 Ohio community hospitals have embraced since the program’s implementation in 1998, says Sites. This leads to “the ability to serve the community and the environment through improving patient safety, developing a safer work place, and protecting the environment against waste and hazardous materials,” says Sites. He adds that these factors create a “culture of safety.”

MENTORING THE PROTÉGÉ

The Ohio Hospital Association’s impact on pollution prevention and waste reduction in Ohio hospitals has been enormous. It led the first collaborative effort with the Ohio EPA to enlist hospitals in the successful implementation of the P2 program. Years ago, in the 1970s, the OHA endorsed energy conservation programs, which led to the OHA’s endorsement in the early 1990s



The Ohio Hospital Association receives the Hospitals of a Healthy Environment (H2E) Champions for Change Award. The award signifies environmental leadership and achievement. Among the recipients (above), Susan Zabo, Project Manager, (Front Row, Center) represents the Ohio Hospital Association.

of the United States EPA Green Lights initiative. Even though decades have passed since the 1970s, the Ohio Hospital Association’s participation in environmental issues didn’t stop there.

In fact, OHA continues to lead the way with new and ongoing steps to resolve pollution and waste concerns. One backbone of the P2 Initiative’s success is the OHA partnership with leading pollution and environmental consultants Hollie Shaner and Glen McCrae. Also, through numerous partnerships with organizations such as the Ohio EPA, the Hospitals for a Healthy Environment (H2E) and the

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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Ohio Hospital Association has developed training tools and implemented pollution and waste oriented educational programs.

It also pioneered the development of the Environmental Leadership Council in 2001. The council is made up of hospital representatives and community organizations, such as the Ohio Nursing Association, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and Hospitals for a Healthy Environment (H2E) organization. The council provides leadership and guidance to the Ohio Hospital Association and Ohio hospitals regarding pollution and waste issues.

With funding through an Ohio EPA Education Foundation grant, the Ohio Hospital Association created a hospital guidebook of the best environmental management practices for hospitals, commenced the Mercury Challenge program in partnership with the Ohio EPA, and started the "Pollution Prevention (P2) University" indicated Susan Zabo, project manager for the OHA's P2 initiative.

The P2 University is an intensive training session conducted by consultants Shaner and McCrae, which is conducted once or twice per year. There is a two or three-day walkthrough of a hospital in which six to eight participants audit and study the host hospital's waste stream, where the waste comes from, how the material circulates through the facility, and how it is disposed of—even to the point of looking into dumpsters to evaluate the disposal. In return, the audits help the host hospital gain an outside review and a second set of eyes to see how the hospital is performing with pollution prevention and waste reduction. "Every audit is confidential," reassures Zabo.

To defray costs, the OHA charges a \$100 registration fee. As of 2006, the Ohio Hospital Association has conducted eight P2 Universities. However, the resources and training for hospitals participating in the P2 Initiative does not stop here. The OHA offers many resources to help member hospitals gain assurance about implementing a

pollution reduction and waste reduction program, such as:

❑ **AUDIO CONFERENCES.**

Training programs such as audio conferences were once conducted by the OHA, but now are conducted by the H2E. These conferences are held nationally and address issues such as safe products to use during cleanings.

❑ **ROUNDTABLES.**

Roundtables are held to allow hospitals to network as they discuss what they are doing, and discuss what is or is not working with their pollution prevention and waste reduction programs.

❑ **NEWSLETTERS.**

EnviroNews is a quarterly newsletter that is sent electronically to each member hospital through e-mail. The newsletter, which discusses environmental and occupational safety news, has been circulated since 2000.

❑ **HOSPITALS FOR A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT (H2E) INFO EXCHANGE LISTSERV.**

The Listserv was created in 2002 by the Ohio Hospital Association and merged with the H2E in 2003. Now, the H2E Info Exchange Listserv is where health care environmental program individuals discuss information relating to environmental issues and improvements.

❑ **TRAINING SESSIONS.**

Since 1999, the Ohio Hospital Association has hosted educational training sessions regarding pollution prevention and waste reduction.

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Glenn McRae (fourth from left) and Hollie Shaner (second from right) are leading consultants and trainers for the Ohio Hospital Associations (OHA) Pollution and Prevention (P2) program and the OHA P2 University. During the Pollution and Prevention (P2) University training, participants audit a hospital's waste stream, waste disposal areas (left) and perform departmental observations (right).

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- ❑ **P2 WEB SITE.** The web site hosts a wealth of information regarding many areas of the pollution prevention initiative and environmental resources. Also, the web site showcases hospitals' progress, award recipients, upcoming seminars and training, press releases and links to other environmental organizations such as the H2E, the EPA, and the Infectious Waste Program. The Ohio Hospital Association's web site is found at www.ohanet.org/p2.

BEATING THE ODDS OR JUST TRUE BENEFITS

Is such a pollution prevention and waste reduction program worth implementing? As witnessed over the past eight years, the Ohio Hospital Association has seen many signs of success. For example, the Fisher Titus Medical Center, one of the P2 Initiative's star students and the recipient of the Partners for Change Award, is living proof. Sites points out the hospital's Fisher-Titus Medical Center's Mercury Thermometer Exchange Program, through which more than 1,000 mercury fever thermometers have been collected. This is a remarkable undertaking, especially in an industry in which "some laboratory managers and physicians want to hold on to mercury," says Sites. He adds that "all products that contain mercury have an effective substitute. Since mercury contains hazardous material, it gives off invisible

vapors over time and can lead to medical conditions such as kidney disease. If there is a mercury spill, the cleanup and disposal of hazardous waste is expensive."

Then, there are the cost savings and employee safety issues relating to pollution and waste stream reduction in the hospital. "One smaller hospital," says Zabo, "noticed a \$7,000 cost savings in one year by reducing red bags in the emergency room." Another way the hospital cut costs, as well as increasing staff safety, was by eliminating garbage cans previously used for biohazardous waste. The use of biohazardous disposal containers led to fewer needle pricks."

A different hospital exposed an underlying safety issue during a P2 audit. "While studying the use of disinfectants and hazardous chemicals at a local hospital in order to decrease the use of hazardous chemicals in the hospital, the hospital discovered that the surgery department was overusing disinfectants. The overuse led to high employee sick leave and respiratory complaints," Sites said.

Although the P2 program's member hospitals are making safety and environmental issues a priority in the health care industry, "they are also taking pollution prevention methods to the public," Sites says. "Most hospitals in Ohio are nonprofit. Therefore, a part of their mission is to serve the community. Incorporating pollution prevention methods into the hospitals operations coincides with their missions for high quality health care and healthier communities." Sites further mentioned, "this is what makes the P2 initiative work.

Hospitals and individuals are interested in environmental issues."

But cost savings, environmental protection and safety are not enough to get some hospitals on board and take advantage of the P2 program. According to Sites, "the P2 Initiative is a voluntary program. There are 170 community hospitals in Ohio and 50 are actively involved. There is a struggle bringing more hospitals actively on board." To gain a higher participation level, the Ohio Hospital Association has developed strategies to help hospitals make the decision to join the P2 Initiative.

One approach was to recognize hospitals and provide encouragement for environmental leadership. To do this, the OHA established the John Chapman award. At an annual awards banquet attended by 600 to 700 people, the recipient receives the award. "The awards ceremony gives the recipients a time to shine in the spotlight and receive recognition for their environmental leadership," says Sites.

A WINNING FORMULA

In an era in which communities and businesses are working to find solutions to fight pollution and reduce waste, there isn't a precise recipe. Nevertheless, the Ohio Hospital Association has established a strong program that many hospitals and other organizations can implement and follow. The P2 Initiative is one approach that empowers hospitals and community leaders to take a stand and learn how to reduce waste and pollution within the health care community.

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