

St. Michael's Sustainable Program



was approached by a member of the Greenbelt Fund, an organization that had been provisioned with \$4.5 million to distribute as part of the Broader Public Sector Investment Fund. This grant opportunity allowed Fletcher to customize her application and gear it towards further investigating the possibility of local food procurement.

In July of 2011, thanks to the Greenbelt Fund grant, Fletcher hired a local food procurement coordinator on an eight month contract to explore how St. Michael's Hospital could focus more on fresh, locally produced foods. According to Fletcher, "patient satisfaction is a primary outcome measure of healthcare food service. Adding local products seemed a natural and logical way to add fresh to the menu and increase patient satisfaction. Our patients are our priority and we wanted them to know that through the menu choices we offered to them".

As a point of departure, the team first zeroed in on replacing frozen and canned items with fresh fruit and vegetables. It bears pointing out that prior to this initiative, St. Michael's was a fully outsourced, cold plate, retherm environment. In order to make this initiative sustainable beyond the duration of the grant, they worked with their current distributors within production methods and labour allocations when considering new products and recipes.

The first recipe developed was an Ontario blueberry crisp featuring fresh blueberries. This item was plated raw into a soup bowl with a compostable soup lid and cooked through the Novaflex tray retherm system that St. Michael's has been using since January 2007. Although this item was indulgent (\$0.65 per serving) the impact of the item on patient satisfaction was impressive and simple menu engineering more than compensated for the increased cost of this dessert.

This is the story of how an apple changed the thinking – and eventually the eating – at one of Toronto's most well known teaching hospitals: St. Michael's. It all started when a dietetic intern decided to investigate the ways in which the Food Services Department could become more sustainable. First measures had already involved implementing recycling and composting stations in the cafeteria and around the hospital. The next step towards sustainability involved taking a closer look at ways in which food was procured. A number of areas were identified where changes could be made including Fair Trade, organic production methods,

sustainably caught seafood and locally produced foods. But the most straightforward step revolved around apples grown in Ontario, which seemed like a good place to start enacting change.

Fast forward to the beginning of 2011 and the team at St. Michael's is now assessing the pros and cons of a new chicken menu item, though the manager of the department, Heather Fletcher RD, was shocked to discover the product comes all the way from Thailand. This was the beginning of lasting change for the food service team. Another significant development occurred later that spring as Fletcher

Next, the team moved on to enhancing the menu with fresh seasonal vegetables. Items such as corn on the cob, fresh steamed broccoli, whole fresh peaches, Ontario grown pears and local apples took their place on the menu with positive results in terms of patient satisfaction.

During the implementation process, the local food coordinator carefully surveyed patients to find out if the new menu items were meeting their satisfaction. Questions focused on finding out how important local food procurement is, how they enjoyed the local food options, as well as issues of portion size, taste and overall satisfaction with meals during their stay. With additional comments also encouraged, the data was compiled to determine if patient satisfaction had increased (one of the goals of the initiative), while remarks were considered in helping to tweak the new recipes.

The next items to make their debut were bias cut carrots and roasted Parisienne style potatoes (grown in Ontario, though!). These two items in particular highlight some of the work being done in other areas of the sector. Farmers and processors started to propose processed items which made the idea of change easier given how tightly allocated labour is in the hospital food service environment.

Simple as these items were, Fletcher insists these two options, along with the blueberry crisp, had the greatest impact on patient satisfaction results. It goes to show that simple changes are noticed and appreciated by patients. Once the Ontario blueberry season was over, a local baked apple crumble took its place. Sliced Ontario apples became available through one of St. Michael's broadline distributors, making this comfort food possible.

The naysayers of this type of program identify the challenges of Canadian winters as the biggest drawback, so to compensate the team looked towards protein and storage crops for their big wins. With the help of their Group Purchasing Organization (who also received a grant from the Greenbelt Fund to research their role in institutional food procurement), St. Michael's was able to introduce some Ontario proteins to their menu including a precooked chicken strip, which stars in a lunch and dinner recipe.

Some hospitals also contend that employing retherm systems makes it challenging to prepare these ingredients properly, but as St. Michael's proved in developing their recipes – and, indeed, as other facilities are discovering as they adopt this fresh, local approach – the existing retherm systems are perfectly effective at boosting patient satisfaction.

Meanwhile, as contracts came up on various items, Fletcher took the opportunity to replace the items that did not receive positive patient feedback with items that included locally procured ingredients and that were created in

house. The lunch item for Fridays at St. Michael's is a chicken and apple wrap, all of the ingredients with the exception of the wrap coming from Ontario. The second item using the pre-cooked chicken strip is an Ontario butter chicken, which includes Ontario vegetables and a pre-made sauce. Fletcher refers to this type of "cooking" as lightly processed since this department does not have the ability to cook items from scratch.

Behind this program's success is a combination of due diligence, project promotion and staff engagement. It was imperative that the locally procured items went through the same scrutiny as any other food item in terms of HAACP certification, federal and provincial standards. Additional certifications were added to the roster such as the GAP Canada Standards (good agricultural practices) for growers. As well, St. Michael's honoured all contracts, which encouraged the focus on fresh fruit and vegetables. The initiative received a lot of outside press, which helped to create momentum and allowed an oft-criticized sector of hospitals to feel proud of their work thanks to the positive reviews.



In addition, internal promotions were tackled in the form of patient information sheets, posters throughout the hospital, a local food cookbook as a fundraiser for a hospital mission and promotional tables at various internal events. Fletcher reports that one of the most unexpected and heartwarming aspects of this initiative was the way that the food service staff really got involved in the project, offering suggestions and feedback, asking for recipes so they can cook some of the items at home and displaying a renewed sense of pride and engagement with their work. It's clear that food really does have the power to bridge gaps, break down barriers and alter the lives of those involved in this type of systemic change.

Although St. Michael's has enjoyed immense success with this initiative on such a large scale, this type of change is not without its challenges. It was really exciting for St. Michael's to be able to offer patients a local fresh peach from the famous Niagara growing region (think wine and tree fruit) to replace imported canned peaches. However, the first week they were expected to arrive, the local food coordinator and Fletcher excitedly looked into the fridge only to find softball-sized, rock hard imported peaches from California. Chalk it up to early stage growing pains, though they certainly questioned whether this initiative was going to work at the time.

A lot of work then took place to let the distributors know that there is a difference between locally sourced products and imported products. When specified, an Ontario version needed to arrive. This was a significant shift because in the past product origin was of no concern. With diligence, patience and some returned products, the distributors began to become much more reliable with their delivery of Ontario products.



The effort called for the food services team to be equally flexible in their approach to allow the sector to change and grow alongside them. This meant a complete dismissal of an "all or nothing" philosophy so Ontario ingredients could be incorporated into a variety of menu items. The Foodland Ontario definitions were employed to guide menu options that contained more than one ingredient. This allowed for items to be carefully named in order to reflect the amount of Ontario content in a recipe. It is this flexible model that will allow for the long-term success of the initiative as the rest of the distribution chain becomes more engaged. It will also allow other hospitals to use St. Michael's Hospital as a viable model of what is possible and how this type of program can be used to increase the wellbeing and experience of patients across the country.

Since the end of the grant period the local food initiative at St. Michael's Hospital is alive and well. New Ontario items have been awarded contracts (a vital link in this type of change) and patients continue to enjoy these recipes. The hope is that this program will continue to grow and thrive as producers and farmers become more aware of institutional needs and how to engage in institutional procurement. Although it is almost a year since this program's inception, it is still early days with lots of potential for increasing the amount of local food purchased by St. Michael's, but this hospital is well on its way to leading the path to a fresh food revolution. And to think this idea started as a mere seed (from an Ontario apple!) which has blossomed into sustainable institutional change.

