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Hospitals to share best practices in recycling processes

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Sustainability Blog

By Jeff Burks, Alison Waske and Joshua Miller

Are you concerned with the cost of trash removal or the amount of your business' waste leaving your facility and ending up in a landfill? Are you interested in creating a comprehensive waste management program at your facility?

If yes, then join the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum on Monday, October 11 at noon at the new Kent County recycling facility to hear how two of our areas hospitals are addressing these same questions.

U.S. hospitals generate approximately 6,600 tons of waste per day according to Practice Greenhealth. This waste can generally be classified as either hazardous or non-hazardous. Hazardous waste is highly regulated and very expensive and at a hospital includes regulated medical waste (RMW), pharmaceutical waste, and general hazardous waste, items specifically identified by law as hazardous. Non-hazardous waste includes trash, recyclables, and food waste. Of the 6,600 tons of hospital generated waste, non-hazardous solid waste – paper, cardboard, food waste, metal, glass, and plastics – accounts for about 85 percent, RMW equals about 10-15 percent, and general hazardous waste makes up less than 5 percent.

Unfortunately, many hospitals routinely dispose of 50-70 percent of their waste in their RMW program, which significantly increases their cost as well as stress on the environment. After RMW is sterilized, processed, and in some cases pulverized, it ends up at a landfill or incinerator. Hospitals often pay up to 10 times more to dispose of RMW versus non-hazardous

solid waste. Case studies prove that with comprehensive training and education, hospitals can realistically aim to decrease RMW waste to a mere 6-10 percent of their waste stream. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control suggests that only 3-5 percent of hospital waste truly needs to be disposed of as RMW.

Although the management of RMW and other hazardous wastes is extremely important, 85 percent of a typical hospital's waste stream is comprised of non-hazardous solid waste that should be going into recycling or trash, preferably recycling.

A major challenge for hospitals is educating employees and patients on the multiple waste streams that exist. In a hospital, a person could encounter over 12 different types of waste bins: trash, compost, non-confidential paper recycling, returnable pop containers, confidential paper batteries, hazardous waste, biomedical waste, sharps, pharmaceutical waste, chemotherapy, and commingled recycling (plastic, metals, glass). Many people want to do the right thing, but with so many options a person may feel overwhelmed and a confused person will default to the perceived safest option, the trash, or in the case of a hospital, RMW bins.

Any business seriously concerned with reducing trash and increasing recycling must create a well thought out and designed waste management program. If you are merely relying upon your waste vendor's invoices, then you are likely missing pertinent information and cost savings. A successful waste management program should include:

- ▶ a comprehensive survey of existing waste receptacles
- ▶ an audit of waste products entering each receptacle via a "dumpster dive"
- ▶ a marketing and educational component to increase awareness and compliance
- ▶ a robust measurement and tracking program
- ▶ and an in-depth review and analysis of all invoices.

Because hospitals, as well as other businesses, have numerous waste streams, likely collected by several different vendors, it is important to create an organized system of documentation, measurement, and management. Some companies use a combination of Excel spreadsheets, word documents and handwritten notes. But with the increasing complexity of waste management programs, some hospitals need a more comprehensive and user-friendly system.

Software programs, such as Key Green Solutions, provide users an alternative to spreadsheets and allow them to collect, measure, and analyze data with a comprehensive web-based software program.

Whether you are a hospital or other business, a well-designed waste management program with measurable and attainable sustainability goals will result in decreased costs, risks, and

landfilled wastes, as well as increased recycling rates and compliance. In addition, utilizing a comprehensive measurement and tracking program such as Key Green Solutions will allow you to fully evaluate the current status of your waste program as well as plan for the future.

At the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum's October 11th monthly meeting, speakers from Spectrum Health Systems, Metro Health Hospital, and Key Green Solutions will be discussing hospital waste streams, including management, reduction methods, tracking and measurement with software tools, and case studies.

Tours of the Recycling Center will be offered following the meeting. Guests are welcome to attend. A \$10 fee can be paid at the door by cash or check or online at www.wmsbf.org. RSVP to info@wmsbf.org by October 6.

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