

Greening Your Clinic

by Allison Baldwin; Marian Morris; Rhonda Nembhard

Austin is a model city of environmental stewardship. Extending this environmental friendliness to health care, Austin's Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas became the first platinum Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) hospital in the world, incorporating benign construction materials, a philosophy of sustainable design, and an aesthetic intended for easing the minds and hearts of its young patients.

During a public health nursing course at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Nursing this summer, a project was chosen to continue in this vein of "greening" health care facilities. Working with Lisa Doggett, MD, director of the UT Family Wellness Center (a CommUnityCare clinic) and co-president of Austin Physicians for Social Responsibility, the goal was to find ways to reduce the "carbon footprint" of the clinic and develop strategies for other local health centers to follow suit.

Efforts to make health care facilities run more sustainably can produce economic benefits through lower overhead and a healthier environment for patients and staff (e.g., by using natural cleaning products). While we await stronger federal legislation and coordinated global efforts to combat climate change and reduce our exposure to environmental toxins, more can be done as individuals now to create a healthy environment for ourselves, our patients, and future generations.

To begin the process of greening your clinic it is important to assess the facility for unhealthy exposures for patients and staff, unintentional environmental waste, and opportunities for savings and conservation. Assessment provides a baseline from which to measure the impact of greening efforts and allows

an opportunity for staff to contribute their ideas. Regular communication about initiating and continuing the program and involvement of all staff are essential. Developing a "Green Team" may encourage employees to work on enhancing the overall sustainability of the clinic or office setting. In addition, an energy audit can help pinpoint inefficiencies in energy usage and create a plan for improvements. See table: What you can do to help get started.

After assessing the Family Wellness Center, our team discovered that some employees carried home recyclable containers, because the clinic lacked a coordinated recycling program. It was recommended that the clinic institute aluminum and plastic container recycling, and were then connected with UT staff who could pick up the recycling



bin when full. It was also recommended that staff turn off computers at night, use power strips to reduce phantom loads, designate a Green Team in the clinic, write Green Team tasks into job descriptions, and investigate an ironic increase in paper use after implementing an electronic medical records system. Finally, strategies to reduce energy use during an upcoming clinic remodel were

Continuum of Greening Projects: What can your clinic do?

- Start a clinic Green Team.
- Gain buy-in of staff to do greening efforts.
- Assess for unintentional waste.
- Arrange for an energy audit from your utility provider
- Set up clinic paper and plastic/aluminum recycling
- Check for proper refrigerator seals
- Check for water leaks in toilets
- Replace appliances with Energy Star appliances
- Use low-VOC paints
- Apply solar film to windows
- Employ reusable medical supplies when possible
- Create a pharmaceutical take-back program to responsibly dispose of unused medications
- See if biohazard wastes can be sterilized so that they can go out with other solid wastes instead of requiring incineration. Look into alternative waste disposal (consult with medical waste facility)
- Install solar panels
- Use contractors who know green building techniques for renovations and new buildings

Small Scale,
Lower Cost



Large Scale,
Higher Cost

Website resources:

AustinEnergy: www.austinenergy.com
 Toilet leaks: www1.eere.energy.gov/consumer/tips
 VOC Paints: http://eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_paints.htm
 Pharmaceutical take-back program: www.takebacknetwork.com/index.html
 Green Builders: www.usgbc-centraltexas.org

Austin Recycles: www.austinrecycles.com
 Energy Star: www.energystar.gov
 Solar Guard: <http://solargard.com>
 Solar Panels: www.txses.org/solar/content/solar-energy-resources

suggested, such as adding solar shades to windows.

Barriers encountered included a lack of resources to carry out greening efforts, a lack of enthusiasm and (possibly) understanding of the benefits of “greening” among some staff, and a lack of infrastructure to measure energy consumption. In an ideal world there would be unlimited funding for greening efforts, but since resources are limited, it is more feasible for clinics to consider larger-scale green projects when funding

becomes available.

The Family Wellness Center is striving to become a more sustainable facility with the ultimate goal of increasing the health of clients, staff, and the environment. They are an example of how a small office takes charge to become more environmentally responsible. Throughout the duration of the project, it was discovered that in order to have a successful green project, support is required. Look for these resources in your setting: strong involvement and

enthusiasm of decision-makers; local models for green efforts; and City of Austin resources (there are many!).

As health care practitioners, we invest tremendous time and energy into improving the health of our individual patients. However, decisions about energy use on a personal level can have a broad influence on the health of future generations. We encourage local physicians to follow the example of the Family Wellness Center by finding ways to reduce your environmental impact.

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