

GREATER NEW YORK HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

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(SOUNDBITE OF INTRO MUSIC)

KATE BASTINELLI, HOST:

Welcome to *Perspectives*. I'm Kate Bastinelli from the Greater New York Hospital Association. Today's episode will feature a highlight of Mayor Eric Adams initiative to combat diet related chronic diseases in New York City by promoting healthy plant-based eating patterns. This approach to combat chronic disease has been applauded by the American College of Lifestyle Medicine and adopted systemwide by NYC Health + Hospitals.

I'm joined by my GNYHA colleague, Wing Lee, who will be interviewing Mercedes Redwood, Assistant Vice President for Management Services for NYC Health + Hospitals. We'll be discussing how Health + Hospitals has transformed their patient meal offerings to feature plant-based meals throughout the health system, benefiting their patients while simultaneously reducing their carbon footprint and saving the system hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

Let's get started.

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WING LEE:

Hi Mercedes. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. We're really excited to learn more about the H+H plant-based meals initiative. So, could you tell us a little bit about your current role and the initiative itself?

MERCEDES REDWOOD:

It's a pleasure to be here. I do oversee the food operation program for all our patients throughout the institute. Primarily, I'm responsible for ensuring that our patients and retail operations are overseen and run appropriately. One of our major accomplishments, which was started in March of '22, was to implement the plant-based initiative program.

LEE:

So, for our listeners who may be new to the concept, can you explain what a plant-based diet is?

REDWOOD:

Certainly, plant-based is primarily having the center of the plate have beans, legumes, no meat, no fish, no chicken. In addition to that, there's no dairy on our trays or any kind of meat substance.



GNYHA is a dynamic, constantly evolving center for health care advocacy and expertise, but our core mission—helping hospitals deliver the finest patient care in the most cost-effective way—never changes.

LEE:

So, maybe you can let us know a little bit about the program and how it was introduced and any specific highlights that you wanted to touch?

REDWOOD:

Definitely, back in 2019, we started our program with having Meatless Monday and we did that for a couple of years and felt that it was really important to move to more plant-based for our patients. So, we decided that we wanted to introduce it to our patients that were eligible. We started in March of '22, only with lunch meal, because of the scalability of doing meals for 11 hospitals. In doing so, we felt that it was very successful and wanted to expand it to dinner meal. There were several things that were done in order to get us to do this. We had to reengineer the culinary plant in Brooklyn, our Central Culinary Institute, where we produce our meals. We hired chefs and redesigned our menu and did about 30 recipes that were plant-based.

LEE:

Can you touch a little bit on the specific challenges that you had with scalability, like what sort of questions that you have at the top of your mind that you really had to overcome?

REDWOOD:

So in order to do this program, one, we had to make sure we were doing a research of making sure that the quality of the food that we were doing, we're going to be scratch cooking and not processed food. It was very important to us not to do processed food, which is high in sodium. So naturally, looking at supply chain and we had a few supply chain challenges, but we were able to overcome that. In addition, it was important to us to have the right chef. And to do a lot of researching and design and practice. We're a cook chill production plant, so we have to make sure that the recipe is able to extend across the cook chill platform.

LEE:

It sounds like you've clearly put a lot of thought into, you know, really designing this program so that it can offer the highest quality of meals to all of your patients. And speaking of patients, how have the patients, and maybe the staff too, reacted to these plant-based meal offerings?

REDWOOD:

So, one of the things we did first, so we could get some buy in, we did a roadshow. So, prior to implementing the lunch plant-based meal, we did a roadshow throughout all 11 hospitals. And by doing the roadshow, we're introducing to our employees, not only our food service staff, but to physicians, to nurses, to social service administration, because we wanted coaches. We wanted them to be able to endorse the plant-based. So, you know, when you walk into a patient's room, you can also identify the items. So, the meals that were

shared were also the same meals that we shared to our patients. To enhance the program and introduce the program, we also brought in additional staff, which we could talk a little bit more if you want.

LEE:

Yeah, I would love to learn more about that.

REDWOOD:

Today we have what we call a food service associate program, where there are employees who are managing our patient dining needs. We hired over 250 employees to the different hospitals, about 35 to 40, patient to one, food service associate. They would speak with the patient to take their diet order, introduce the plant-based meal, explain the benefit of plant-based, and if that patient chose not to go with the first choice, they do have a second alternate. And even if they choose not to go with the second alternate, we offer vegetarian burgers, we also offer salads. So there are wide variety that our patient could choose from.

LEE:

Oh my gosh, that sounds absolutely amazing. I just love how patient centric this program clearly is. And speaking of sort of putting the patient in the middle of the program and really catering to their needs, I was just wondering how you've engaged hospital patients to prioritize these plant-based meals and developing culturally diverse options to, you know, help the patients be comfortable with shifting perhaps to a plant-based meal more regularly?

REDWOOD:

So, one of the things that we did, we developed a plant-based recipe book that was designed for 10 portions, and that was also introduced to patients so they have an idea of what they're getting. They're also getting recipe cards that show different food items and the benefit for them. In terms of cultural diversity, we, you know, we have 11 hospitals, which is quite diverse throughout our five boroughs. And we are using recipes that matches those diversity.

LEE:

And these recipe cards, are they something that the patient gets to take home with them?

REDWOOD:

Yes, they do.

LEE:

Oh wow, that's incredible. So, you know, from the point of hospitalization to continuing that change in their home lives as well.

REDWOOD:

We have had lots of compliments from patients. Some patients that were new to plant-based were anxious to try. We also have patients who are following a plant-based program, they were happy to have the exposure and introduce different recipes. So that was exciting.

LEE:

Right, it sounds like a success on all fronts. Could you give a couple of examples maybe of some dishes that have been particularly well-received, or recipes that have gone down really well?

REDWOOD:

Some of our popular entrees are garden bolognese, which is actually one of our first and continues to be on the top of the list. In addition to that, we have sancocho. Sancocho is usually a Spanish dish that is made with meat. We exclude the meat and we're using yams and plantains and all the ingredients that gives the flavor of the sancocho without the meat. Another favorite is our black-eyed peas casserole, which is served over a baked cornbread, so it has that southern flair to it. The proteins are coming mostly from our beans. So all our dishes are definitely adequate in protein, because that's one of the questions that we often ask.

LEE:

That sounds great, and you might have given me some inspiration for my own meals. So, thinking a little bit more about if other facilities or other hospital systems perhaps wanted to join H&H in promoting a healthier plant-based diet for their patients, would you have any resources available that maybe they could tap into and use?

REDWOOD:

So, on our website we do have our recipes. In addition, we have often shared with anyone who's interested that they're open to come in for a tour. But most importantly, it's important to have good support. Today, we have Mayor Adams, who very much from his own personal diet, has endorsed this program. Doctor Katz, the president, has endorsed the program. That also helped with the financial importance to really get this scaled throughout 11 hospitals.

LEE:

Absolutely. So, it sounds like not only do you need your leadership endorsement, but you need to keep your ear to the ground to make sure that you're really hearing the feedback from the patients. And speaking of feedback from patients, I understand that you've been surveying some of your patients on their satisfaction with the plant-based meals. Could you share a little bit more about that?

REDWOOD:

Certainly, we do complete a survey. Actually, we round daily and their survey on a regular basis. And with that, we're very pleased to say we're still running over 90% satisfaction of patients that are receiving plant-based meals.

LEE:

So, we've heard a lot about the benefits to the patient of a plant-based diet, but maybe you can touch a little bit on if you've seen any specific benefits for the system?

REDWOOD:

We definitely saw several benefits to the system. One is food cost. The center of the plate is \$0.59 less than if we were serving meat, chicken, or fish.

LEE:

That's incredible.

REDWOOD:

So, that's a good win there. In addition to that, our carbon footprint, given the fact that we're purchasing far less meat items, has been 36% reduction.

LEE:

And so, we touched on the cost savings. We talked on the carbon savings as well. And how did the staff feel about this?

REDWOOD:

Our staff are very excited about this. They've even asked if we can serve more plant-based in our retail establishment, which we are doing now, and they also participated in recipe contests. So they're all engaged in doing that.

LEE:

Well, thank you so much, Mercedes. I guess if we were to close out on our conversation, what would be your top tip that you would offer for facilities interested in embarking on this plant-based meal journey?

REDWOOD:

Most important, start small. You know, as I said before, we started first with Meatless Monday to collect your data. Ensure that the recipes for the plant-based entrees are going to be scalable. They're also going to be satisfying to the patient population that you're serving. That is very important. It's also important to explain the benefit of plant-based when you're introducing it to your patient. So they get a little bit of understanding. What we have also done is give samples. If a patient said, "Ohh let me try it," our food service associates are so skilled in saying how about if I give you a small portion to try and then the next day, they'll do a full entree of a different plant-based.

LEE:

That sounds great. I love the idea of doing a trial, just thinking about my own experience. I'm, you know, I probably would want to do a trial before I, you know, shift wholesale into something that I wasn't totally clear about. Well, thank you so much, Mercedes, for sharing your experiences with implementing plant-based meal over at NYC H+H, and we hope that this may inspire others to go on a similar journey. So, with that, I think we'll close out for today. Thank you again.

REDWOOD:

Thank you. I just want to end with saying October of last year, we hit our million meals served since we started the program. So we're pretty excited about that and we definitely want to do a celebration. We feel this is so key to celebrate our success.

LEE:

Absolutely, that is definitely a feat that should be celebrated.

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BASTINELLI

Thank you for joining us today. Please visit our website gnyha.org for companion materials on the NYC Health + Hospitals Initiative. Until next time, this has been *Perspectives*.