



# HEALTHY EATING HABITS

BY HEATHER BOLINE AND MARIE KULICK

Freeman Health System recently launched a system-wide effort to not only transform the food environment at its three hospitals but to become an agent of food change in southwest Missouri. The largest employer in the region, Freeman had already taken steps to encourage healthier practices, such as encouraging employees to walk 30 minutes and eat five servings of fruits and vegetables per day; however, as healthcare providers, the staff at Freeman felt an obligation to do more—to lead by example in providing better access to fresh, nutritious foods and beverages and by taking a broader approach that seeks to contribute to a healthier food system overall.

Demonstrating commitment to this broader approach, Freeman became the first Missouri health system to sign the Healthy Food in Healthcare Pledge. In doing so, Freeman joined more than 350 U.S. hospitals and health systems in transforming healthcare food service.

Additionally, Freeman sought and received a \$300,000 grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) to promote the availability of nutritious foods to patients, employees, and visitors. The grant has already enabled Freeman to make significant changes.

The system-wide effort to promote healthful eating is off to a strong start. Availability of fruits and vegetables has increased significantly in patient meals and Freeman cafeterias. Patients not on restrictive diets can now order fresh green salads from the lunch and dinner

menus, and fresh fruit is available at each meal. More recipes are prepared from scratch, and patient meal satisfaction scores have reached an all-time high. Freeman salad bars now offer locally purchased fruits and vegetables when seasonally available, promoting healthy food options and supporting local farming communities as well.

David Ball, CDM, CFPP, Freeman Supervisor of Nutrition Services, is very pleased with the progress made so far. “The Nutrition Services staff has done an amazing job transitioning from the typical freezer-to-oven or -fryer preparation, to making foods from scratch,” he said.

To further increase access to fresh produce, farmers markets will open at Freeman Hospital West, Freeman Hospital East, and Freeman Neosho Hospital. With the assistance of Eileen Nichols, Webb City Farmers Market organizer, several area farmers have agreed to populate the Freeman markets from June through September. Freeman West markets will take place 7-10 am every Wednesday, Freeman East markets will open 7-9 am on the first and third Thursdays each month, and Freeman Neosho will host markets 7-9 am on the second and fourth Thursdays. All three markets are open to the public.

Placing a new emphasis on healthful fats, such as olive oil for cooking and trans-fat-free processed foods, Freeman has eliminated deep-fried foods from cafeterias and patient menus. Nutrition staff members now bake items instead of frying, a change that has also

proved healthful for the health system's bottom line, saving Freeman \$20,000 a year in frying oil purchases.

The health system also considers broader ecological health issues when deciding which foods to purchase. All milk now comes from farmers who pledge not to use recombinant bovine growth hormone, a genetically engineered growth hormone injected into dairy cows to increase milk production in the U.S. All ground beef recipes are made with certified organic, grass-fed beef from Missouri farms, and Freeman is working with food suppliers to further increase the use of meat and poultry products raised in ways that are healthy for both people and the environment. All of these changes were accomplished in the first six months of the three-year MHF grant, with more positive changes to follow.

"Freeman serves more than 1 million meals each year," said Kelly Stipp, CDM, CFPP, Freeman Director of Nutrition Services. "As a healthcare system and major food purchaser and provider, we need to set an example, and that is what we intend to do."

#### About the authors

Heather Boline, Registered Dietitian and Freeman Nutrition Project Coordinator, has more than 19 years experience in the field of clinical nutrition in various healthcare settings in Kansas and Missouri.

Marie Kulick, Health Care Without Harm Sustainable Procurement Advisor, serves as advisor to the Freeman healthy food project. She has worked for more than 20 years to advance ecologically healthy policies and practices, most recently as Senior Policy Analyst for the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.



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