

## Completing the Circle: Confluence Health Partners in New Composting Program

**Wenatchee, WA:** Serving not only patients receiving care but visitors and staff as well, the kitchen at Confluence Health Hospital Central Campus is a busy one. Preparing 1,500 meals every day means that, in addition to providing excellent nutrition to those recovering from surgery or a healthy lunch to a busy nurse, there can be a lot of waste generated. In addition to the standard garbage, kitchens like this also produce a large amount of organic waste – the tops of tomatoes, lettuce leaves that don't make the cut, the insides of bell peppers, eggshells, and even some paper products – that previously would have just gone into the regular trash collection service.

At the urging of many of the cooks working the lines, leadership looked into the possibility of teaming up with a composting service to turn waste that would previously have gone to a landfill into something that would do some good, not only for the planet but to help complete the circle of growing the food that, in turn, would feed patients and staff.

"Anything we can do to keep things a bit greener is always a good thing," reflected Mike Miller, a cook at the Central Campus kitchen. "Composting is a great start."

"For all the people and families living in our community, this is a great benefit for their health as we help to produce compost that means we can avoid using chemicals to help grow food," said Maria Nordstrom, who also works as a cook at the Central Campus. "Organic methods are better."

The Confluence Health food services team were then contacted by Robbette Schmit, sales, marketing, and outreach manager at Winton Manufacturing, a compost service company based in Leavenworth, about starting to divert their compostable waste since the company recently began servicing the Wenatchee area. After making a similar outreach to Wenatchee Valley College for their waste and going through the logistics of the collection, Confluence Health agreed to partner.

"Our first commercial customer was a butcher in Cashmere and then the Cascade School District adopted a compostable waste program where the kids sort their waste into different categories, including compost, recycle, and landfill," explained Schmit. "After that, restaurants and hotels in Leavenworth began our service, along with the launch of our community composting program. In total we have 26 service stops in the Leavenworth area and have just now begun servicing the Wenatchee and East Wenatchee areas. Confluence Health is our second Wenatchee customer."

Despite being only in the early stages of the program, it is already bearing dividends with hopes of expansion.

"To start, we began by focusing on pre-consumer waste – the leftover scraps that come from preparing meals that can't be used but can easily be collected and turned into compost – but we hope to later expand into collecting post-consumer waste as well, which is the food that is left over when cleaning up," explained Michelle Harris, food services director at Confluence Health. "Initially, we have rolled it out at Confluence Health Hospital Central Campus, but we hope to expand it to other locations later too. It's gone extremely well so far with us currently collecting two 96-gallon totes once a week, but we might be able to go up to as much as three totes twice a week."

Like all progress, however, implementing the program required several changes to the kitchen's workflow. Despite the shifts, the staff involved in the project have been not only supportive, but passionate and excited.

“It’s been great so far and is working so smoothly,” commented Lana Babak, a cook at the Central Campus kitchen. “It is great to see things going back into the ground rather than becoming waste.”

“I love it,” chimed in fellow cook Lynnsie Beckstead, as numerous other coworkers serving up meals nodded in agreement.

Many of the staff commented that, in addition to the material benefits to the planet and the pride of knowing that they are helping to complete the sustainable circle when it comes to food production, there are practical benefits as well. With the compost being collected in small buckets at workstations and then dropped in separate composting totes, this lightens up the regular garbage cans which previously were often quite heavy, making them easier for staff to manage.

“We’ve been composting everything we can, including coffee grounds,” continued Harris. “What has made me so proud throughout this transition is how supportive and enthusiastic everyone has been. Change can sometimes be hard and oftentimes there are complaints when something new starts. But for this program, it’s been the opposite. There have been almost no complaints but rather excitement. In fact, probably the only complaint has been that we should have done it sooner.”

“It has been a joy working with Michelle and the Confluence Health Hospital Central Campus kitchen team,” continued Schmit. “The team has some strong employees that are huge advocates of composting. Since beginning the program, I have seen a strong empowerment from the entire team as they divert food waste into a resource to combat climate change and sequester carbon. Michelle has been up to the facility, and I can’t wait to share the process with a team on a field trip to tour our facility. The entire team is having a local impact on our region. I love that we will be able to show real change and impact, and the numbers are exciting; the hospital at Central Campus is currently diverting about 200 pounds of food waste a week. That is equivalent to almost half a ton of compostables a month!”

The new composting program is making an incredible impact on the kitchen team, the organization, and the entire region. And they’re just getting started.

### **About Confluence Health**

Confluence Health serves the largest geographic region of any healthcare system in Washington State, covering over 12,000 square miles of Okanogan, Grant, Douglas, and Chelan counties. Confluence Health is one of only two locally-lead healthcare systems in the state with the purpose of maintaining availability and access to high-quality, cost-effective healthcare services for North Central Washington. The Confluence Health Board of Directors provides governance for Confluence Health and includes nine community board members and six physician board members.

### **For More Information**

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