

# CASE STUDY



## HEALTHY BEVERAGE PROGRAM: CONNECTICUT MENTAL HEALTH CENTER

The Connecticut Mental Health Center (CMHC) is dedicated to a holistic philosophy of care for its patients. Psychiatric care provided is based upon the “recovery” model: a treatment concept wherein a service environment (including a broad range of education and skill building programs, and more recently, the offering of primary care in the mental health center) is designed such that consumers have primary control over decisions about their own care, based on the concepts of strengths and empowerment, saying that if individuals with mental illnesses have greater control and choice in their treatment, they will be able to take increased control and initiative in their lives. Building resilience to manage one’s life with a hopeful attitude are key features of the “recovery journey.”

In 2011, the senior leadership of CMHC committed to an organization-wide “food and nutrition transformation initiative” and began a five year, multi-step planning and implementation process to create a food service program for patients, staff and visitors that is nutritious, environmentally sound, socially responsible, and economically viable. Details of this commitment are set forth in the institutional food policy formally adopted at the outset of the change process. CMHC aligned itself with Health Care Without Harm and participated in the Healthier Hospitals Initiative (HHI) Healthier Beverage Challenge in 2012. This choice was made to catalyze the change process with an activity that was feasible within the resources then available and could target the significant public health problem of consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. The Center partnered with a Connecticut-based company that leases state-of-the-art filtered water stations using tap water and placed these stations throughout its main building and all satellite facilities. Within a few months, following a carefully organized internal marketing campaign heralding the benefits of good, clean, and “free” water, all vending machines (sodas and snacks were eliminated from the main building) except two that remain in the staff lounge—a big change at a very minimal cost to CMHC.

### Connecticut Mental Health Center

The Connecticut Mental Health Center (CMHC) is a State of Connecticut / Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services community mental health center located in New Haven, CT and operated in partnership with Yale University Department of Psychiatry. CMHC has a 50-year history of providing treatment to disadvantaged persons from diverse backgrounds with serious mental illness. In addition, CMHC is committed to educating the next generation of behavioral health professionals, who will not only care for the seriously mentally ill but also continue the missions of education and research into the treatment of mental and addictive disorders. CMHC treats more than 5000 outpatients a year and provides 42 inpatient and research beds.

The mission objectives of the CMHC are: Service, Education, Research, and Community (medicine/yale.edu/psychiatry/care/cmhc).



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## The Problem

Obesity and diet-related disease are a national crisis and Connecticut has not been spared. According to the latest data, 59.6 percent of Connecticut residents are overweight or obese, with 24.5 percent designated as obese. Experts predict the number of obese to rise to 46.5 percent by 2030. In New Haven, seven in 10 people are overweight and 43 percent are obese: In the five poorest neighborhoods which are those primarily served by CMHC, only 19 percent of residents report eating the recommended 5 servings a day of fruits and vegetables (C.A.R.E survey, 2012).

A 2010 report from the New York Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence at the New York State Psychiatric Institute noted, “compared to persons in the general population, individuals with serious mental illness...die 25 years younger, largely due

to preventable physical health conditions.” Therefore, the obesity and diet-related disease health crisis is of particular interest for CMHC. Its clients are disproportionately affected by the U.S. food system which produces and markets foods that are often counter-indicated to a healthful lifestyle, forced by poverty and circumstance to limit their food intake to high calorie, low nutrient processed products manufactured and distributed, through methods that are often not environmentally sustainable.

Leading public health agencies, including the Connecticut Department of Public Health recommend limiting consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages as an obesity and diet-related disease prevention strategy. CMHC initiated a healthy beverage program both as a health promotion strategy and as an environmental stewardship strategy in the early phase of its “Food Transformation Initiative.”

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## Strategy & Implementation

To guide its overall initiative, CMHC created an internal working group led by COO Robert Cole, MHSA, which included senior leadership and was also supported by the CEO's Peer Advisory Group. Realizing a need for external expertise, CMHC enlisted the help of the consulting firm Fresh Advantage® ([freshadvantage.com](http://freshadvantage.com)) to develop a plan to guide the creation of all the food service operations serving staff, patients, and visitors, as well as clinical practices and educational programs to focus attention on addressing food insecurity among CMHC clients and to promote learning and behaviors needed for a health promoting diet.

The CMHC food transformation began in earnest in April 2012 when Dr. Michael Sernyak, CEO of CMHC met with senior staff at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity, a non-profit research and public policy organization devoted to improving the world's diet, preventing obesity, and reducing weight stigma ([uconnruddcenter.org](http://uconnruddcenter.org)) who invited the managing director of food system consulting firm Fresh Advantage to the discussion. The group discussed opportunities and resources to assist Dr. Sernyak with CMHC's goal of creating a new, health-driven way of feeding the CMHC community.

CMHC was able to secure a three-year grant from a private family foundation to support Fresh Advantage's consulting services to develop a master plan. Other funding to support the entire initiative was raised by the CMHC Foundation and provided by the State of Connecticut

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. While the plan was in development, the following steps were taken.

### Key Milestones

On July 30, 2012, the CEO signed the Health Care Without Harm "Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge" which is displayed in prominent locations at CMHC. The internal working group drafted an institutional food policy, which was reviewed by the requisite hospital committees and formally adopted.

CMHC signed on to the HHI's Healthy Beverage Challenge to begin the change process while more long-term activities, including physical plant renovation to create a commercial kitchen and new dining space. Taking this challenge inspired cultural changes and establishment of goals, while affording access to tracking and reporting tools. To meet the challenge CMHC:

- Created a filtered water program, installing 12 water stations in the main building and several more in satellite clinics. The triple filter stations are leased from a state approved vendor, allowing them to source tap water without concern about contamination from bacteria or pipes in poor condition.
- Reviewed the food and beverages offered for sale in the cafeteria and identified new vendors to increase the amount of local, sustainable and organic products, as well as additional healthy beverage choices. As a result, CMHC began offering alternative

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CMHC specifically targeted products containing high fructose corn syrup for reduction and/or elimination based upon recent scientific evidence of its contribution to harmful levels of caloric intake, as well as the environmental health implications specific to growing corn, a very pesticide-intensive crop.

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- Eliminated all soda and snack vending machines, except for two that are in the staff lounge and incorporated healthier beverage options into those remaining vending machines.
- Held a “water party” for staff and ambulatory clients featuring a wide range of fresh fruit and herb infused waters, together with a contest to determine CMHC favorites.
- Used fresh fruit infused, filtered tap water as the beverage of choice for meetings and catered events.
- Other efforts included promotional events, such as a walking challenge celebration (“Walk to Key West and Back”) that included free reusable stainless steel water bottles for consumers.

In August, CMHC began auditing various pieces of its beverage environment to inform its efforts. For example, it conducted an audit of 2012 fourth quarter data on CMHC beverage procurement. In addition, CMHC completed a Healthy Beverage Program self audit to document beverage policies, practices, access points and product selection currently in place. Finally,

CMHC developed a management process for tracking the beverages purchased in order to support reporting to HHI for the Healthy Beverage Challenge.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Support of the CMHC senior leadership was essential to the adoption of principles of health and wellness. The biggest challenges to implementing the food and beverage initiatives were the lack of cooperation by the vending machine supplier to provide more healthful choices in the snack and beverage machines, and a negative reaction by some clients and staff to the changes in beverage offerings. CMHC identified the need to communicate and educate staff as well as to involve as many staff as possible in decisions regarding changes in order to decrease the perception of a loss of freedom of choice.

To address the negative reaction, CMHC developed clear and concise communication about the food and beverage service changes taking place, and provided this message to consumers and to staff. CMHC sent mass emails and monthly wellness committee newsletters with the same messaging. In addition, CMHC posted information about various topics including nutrition and healthy beverages on a Health and Wellness bulletin board in a public area. CMHC placed “Rethink Your Drink” posters, which uses the traffic light beverage classification, in the cafeteria. To support this messaging,

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CMHC created a visual display about food and beverage choices that utilizes various ideas from a recent Peabody Museum exhibit entitled “Big Food,” a multimedia exhibit which challenges visitors to reflect on their role in personal and community health and the sustainability of our food system. Within a few months, staff were thanking the CEO for providing the water stations. Peers also created a food film series that is ongoing, featuring films such as *King Corn*, *A Place at the Table*, *Fed Up* and others that contributes significantly to the cultural aspects of the change process.

## Benefits

After the first quarter, CMHC reduced its purchase of sugar-sweetened beverages from 65.5 percent to 31.6 percent of total beverages purchased. This is a 52 percent reduction in unhealthy beverages purchased and provided by the facility. CMHC earned the Gold Achievement Award and fit friendly worksite designation by the American Heart Association. As of November 2015, all sugar-sweetened beverages have been eliminated from the premises, with the exception of a few items in one beverage vending machine in the staff lounge.

## What's next?

CMHC is pursuing:

- Individual nutritional counseling for clients who choose to receive their primary care in the “Wellness Center” that was established within CMHC in 2013.
- A pilot group “food learning” program for ambulatory clients entitled “Better Eaters Club” for nutritional counseling clients that empowers individuals to adopt a health driven diet by teaching culinary, budgeting and shopping skills, that can expanded to all clients eventually that includes emphasis on healthy beverages.
- Selecting a monthly or quarterly client or staff wellness champion who is making a strong effort to support a healthy initiative.
- Developing catering service/healthy meeting guidelines.
- Identification of a vendor that can supply 100 percent fruit juices in smaller sizes (4 oz.) and identifying certified coffee options.
- Measuring the effectiveness of the program by conducting pre, during and post surveys of clients and employees about their habits and attitudes towards food in general, including sugary drinks and their options about the currently available food and beverage alternatives.
- Presentations at local and national conferences on the results of the program and the role of food in mental health care.
- “Good Food Learning” workshops for psychiatric residents supported by a grant from a private donor.