

LAKEWOOD HEALTH SYSTEM



STAPLES, MINNESOTA

LEADER

Tim Rice

BUDGET

\$1M – \$4,999,999

GEOGRAPHY

Minnesota,
Native Nations

YEARS ACTIVE

Founded in 1936

INNOVATION STORY NO. 3

MORE FARM, LESS PHARMACY: ADDRESSING HEALTH AND HUNGER IN RURAL MINNESOTA

Lakewood Health System (LHS) harnesses its size and agility to inspire innovations that lead to a healthier, economically stronger region. With an emphasis on investing in mission rather than financial gain, LHS encourages all levels of staff to share ideas to improve the health and well-being of patients and the community.

STORY BY COURTNEY BERGEY

**“ IF SOMEONE
SAYS
YOU’RE
CRAZY,
YOU’RE ON
THE RIGHT
TRACK.**

— TIM RICE, Lakewood Health System

INNOVATION

LAKWOOD HEALTH SYSTEM

LHS harnesses its size and agility to inspire innovations that lead to a healthier, economically stronger region.

BREAKTHROUGH



Through the Choose Health Initiative, LHS leverages local community partnerships to reduce food insecurity, improve the health of local residents and increase the economic prosperity of rural, low-income and minority growers.



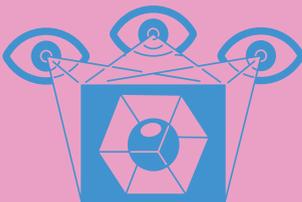
TOPPLING TENSION AND REDUNDANCY

Over 30 years ago, LHS began coordinating monthly meetings with a handful of local leaders. What started as a simple attempt to stay connected and informed has transformed into a powerful cross-sector partnership that improves the lives of people in the Staples community.



INDIVIDUAL OWNERSHIP, COLLECTIVE IMPACT

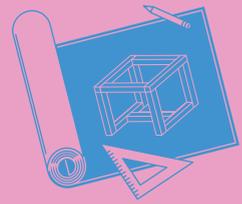
LHS leadership ignores traditional hierarchy in an effort to empower employees at all levels to propose new ways of working, identify internal challenges and suggest improvements. Together, LHS staff co-builds a better workplace.



CREATES A SHARED VISION



WELCOMES IDEAS



VALUES PROACTIVITY

ROWS OF OVERSTUFFED GROCERY BAGS,

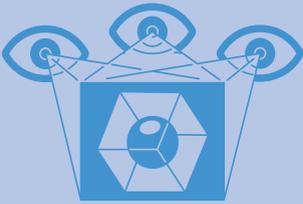
lumpy with the week's potato harvest, fill a crowded table at the Staples, Minnesota, farmers market. A few feet away, a line forms of more than a dozen families waiting to pick up their weekly supply of fresh produce. Elderly couples and parents of fidgety preschoolers shuffle into the queue. Most make under \$20,000 a year and live in one of the state's most food-insecure communities. Despite being surrounded by farm fields and agriculture, many people in line are new to the practice of buying fresh produce directly from farmers.

The parking lot they stand in is full of pickup trucks, vendor tents, local farmers and countless vegetables, but what looks like an average farmers market is anything but typical. LHS's Choose Health initiative is a first-of-its-kind program that reduces the pressing challenges of hunger and food insecurity in rural Minnesota through a weekly CSA program supplied by local growers.

To design a new model that connects small-town families to affordable and nutritious food, LHS joined forces with community partners in education, economic development, public health, human services and agriculture. The idea was simple: during routine patient visits, physicians identify food-insecure families and “prescribe” them free bags of fresh fruits and vegetables.

LHS’s open-air model relieves the stigma often associated with visiting a food shelf

and replaces it with the trendy and popular idea of a farmers market. The program trades canned goods and non-perishable items in favor of fresh produce that is healthier and free to families who need it. The model provides a dignified solution to food security that simultaneously lifts up community farmers and the local food economy. By focusing on the human experience, LHS stretches beyond its traditional role as a hospital, clinic and senior care services provider to find new ways to improve the overall health of the community.



CREATES A SHARED VISION: When it comes to staying healthy, LHS believes in leading by example. At first when LHS proposed a ban on sugary beverages in the cafeteria, employees resisted. The LHS team approached the disagreement through open dialogue with staff. The team provided education on the health risks of consuming sugar-saturated drinks and ultimately reached a breakthrough when employees agreed to a no-sugary-beverage policy across the entire LHS system. Today, LHS’s employee wellness program also includes health tracking and fitness participation credits.

“

WE ARE SMALL, WE TAKE RISKS AND WE CAN DO A LOT OF THINGS THAT A MUCH BIGGER HEALTH SYSTEM CAN'T.

— TIM RICE, Lakewood Health System

Toppling Tension and Redundancy



When you're the rookie leader in a rural community, it can be tough to build trust and credibility while navigating small-town politics and families that have lived in the area for generations. Shortly after assuming his role as president/CEO, Tim Rice noticed community groups duplicating efforts toward the same collective goals. Organizations worked in silos instead of together, using twice the amount of effort and resources to tackle a problem alone rather than in partnership. He decided to call a meeting and invited local leaders with a wide range of affiliations to attend. He didn't set an agenda or propose an outcome beyond simply listening to each other. Tim encouraged collaboration and transparency by asking the group, "How do we make sure we have an avenue to connect with each other?"

In the first year, participants freely exchanged

ideas, discovered potential collaborators and advocated for one another while nipping local rumors or tension in the bud. "If something comes out in the media, it's natural for the community to start drawing conclusions," says Tim, who watched suppositions fly when the newspaper ran an article about funding cuts at the local college. People speculated that the college might close or eliminate programs, but those rumors stopped when school leadership got a chance to explain the situation to Tim's group and use them as advocates. "I wanted an opportunity to get everyone in a room and hit issues like those head on," says Tim. "That allows us to keep focused on the true issues."

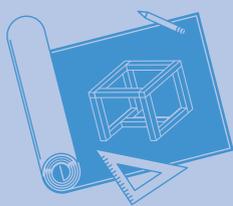
The cohort, which calls itself Leadership Engagement Advocacy Positivity (LEAP), decided to keep meeting monthly and has done so for over 30 years. LEAP's consistent focus on trust and open communication

transforms a simple attempt to keep each other informed into a powerful cross-sector partnership. When a challenge or opportunity arises, group members don't need to start from scratch establishing rapport—they can move straight into the work. The cohort is intimately familiar with the assets and resources of each partner, creating an active community of fellow professionals it can call on. By keeping meetings free of agendas, the group is able to focus on the most pressing community needs as they surface, such as the burgeoning food-insecurity crisis.

LEAP's successful model hinges on two key features. First, the group has developed a mission and a set of guiding principles that it reviews annually. By determining the cohort's purpose collectively, all participants share an understanding of the conversations that are appropriate for the group to address. Secondly, consistent leadership through the LEAP chair position keeps members organized, focused and motivated.

Relationships established through LEAP have laid the foundation for many community projects, including the Choose Health program. With a startup grant from Hunger-Free Minnesota, a healthy foods program emerged and combined the strengths of several partners: LHS doctors identify food-insecure families; the local University of Minnesota Extension and Todd County Public Health offices provide cooking and wellness education; the Region Five Development Commission lends marketing and resource-sharing support; Central Lakes College provides gleaning; and Sprout, a nonprofit regional marketplace, assembles more than 40 local farmers to supply the produce. "Without one partner it just wouldn't work," says Tim.

When the program launched in 2015, LHS physicians screened 339 families during regular doctor visits and identified 40 families to participate in the program. By 2016, the number jumped to more than 100 families.



VALUES PROACTIVITY: After launching the Choose Health program, the partners noticed a problem: many families had no idea how to cook or prepare the food they received in their CSA boxes. To boost culinary confidence among its members, the local extension office began to host brief food demonstrations on the days participants picked up their CSA shares. Through the demonstrations, families learned how to make a new dish that used the ingredients in their weekly box and also got tips on how to store and preserve their produce. When partners realized some participants couldn't find adequate transportation or childcare to get to class, the organization started to offer that, too. The partners even went so far as to give families measuring cups and spatulas if they didn't own the proper kitchen utensils to make healthy meals.

“

**WE'RE ALL HERE FOR THE
GREATER GOOD, NOT OUR
OWN AGENDA.**

— TIM RICE, Lakewood Health System

Individual Ownership, Collective Impact



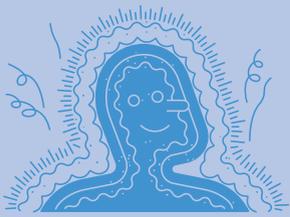
The phrase, “That’s a terrible idea,” isn’t the kind of feedback most CEOs enjoy hearing from staff, but Tim welcomes it. “When you create a culture of openness, you’re going to get different opinions,” says Tim. “[When] people raise questions it allows you to be better prepared and get better results.” In the top-down world of healthcare, LHS values a flatter organizational structure that challenges traditional staff roles and spurs new avenues for ideation.

LHS levels the playing field for all of its employees. With this mentality, the organization empowers employees to actively engage in problem-solving, brainstorming new programs and challenging internal practices. Tim leads by example, staying relaxed and approachable even while accepting constructive criticism. “If someone says you’re crazy, you’re right on track,” he says. The question you won’t hear staff ask often at LHS is, “How will we pay for this?”

When a new idea crops up, LHS's primary focus is on the impact it will create in the community.

Employees at all levels co-build the culture of LHS, creating a deeper sense of pride and ownership in the group's work. The most demonstrative example of this is Partners in Action (PIA), a working cohort of 40 employees representing every department in the healthcare system. Since 1993, PIA has met with Tim and other management staff on a monthly basis to discuss issues, brainstorm ideas and review changes.

Anyone is allowed to apply for a two-year term on PIA, meaning Tim hears perspectives from cooks, custodians, physicians and specialists. The group elects its own officials to participate in all of the hospital administration's major decision-making meetings, ensuring all employees have representation in conversations that are traditionally controlled by management. For example, when the organization needed to adjust employee benefits, the entire PIA cohort parsed through the financial reasons behind the proposed change and developed a solution to move forward. By taking ownership of the process through collective decision-making, employees invested in the wider LHS community.



WELCOMES IDEAS: LHS encourages its employees to contribute feedback through an online suggestion box where staff can alert management to issues, make suggestions for improvement and pitch ideas for new programs. Suggestions from staff include the Choose Health program, a no-sugary-beverages policy, expanded clinic hours and employee gardens. PIA and department staff review every single submission whether the idea is implemented or not. This process demonstrates LHS's commitment to innovation and empowers employees to challenge the status quo and make positive change in their workplace.



STAFF, Lakewood Health System

“

WHEN YOU CREATE A CULTURE OF OPENNESS, YOU'RE GOING TO GET DIFFERENT OPINIONS. [WHEN] PEOPLE RAISE QUESTIONS IT ALLOWS YOU TO BE BETTER PREPARED AND GET BETTER RESULTS.

— TIM RICE, Lakewood Health System



INTERIOR, Lakewood Health System

GROUNDS
Lakewood Health System



EXTERIOR
Lakewood Health System





INTERIOR
Lakewood Health System



INTERIOR
Lakewood Health System