

Community Health

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National Association of Community Health Centers

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# GREEN BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS

## *Why and How*

By *Marisa Manley*

Meaningful use, accountable care organizations, patient-centered medical homes, and physician recruiting are all high priority issues for your community health center. Should green building strategies be a priority for you as well?

How expensive are green building strategies? How will they benefit your health center and the larger community? Do they apply only to new construction or can they improve an existing facility? What if you are a tenant at a facility, can or should you use green strategies at a leased facility?

Green building strategies — sometimes called sustainable — recognize that activities related to the construction and operations of buildings consume significant amounts of energy and other resources, sometimes inefficiently. Green practices promote more efficient use of resources. Green building strategies consider design practices more broadly as well. They seek to promote design practices that proponents believe will promote greater health and satisfaction of those occupying and visiting green buildings.

The United States Green Building Council (USGBC), a not-for-profit, private foundation, has been a leader in promoting green building practices and widely accepted metrics for green buildings. Their LEED certification (Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design) has become a widely recognized standard for green building practices.

The USGBC promotes three types of standards that apply to health centers: LEED standards for new building construction, LEED standards for renovations, and LEED standards for commercial interiors. Also it released a new LEED standard for health care related construction (LEED— HC) in April 2011.

Advocates of green design believe that implementing green design principles will reduce energy use, promote greater satisfaction with the “built” environment and possibly improve

the health of both staff, visitors and in the case of health care facilities — patients.

LEED standards for building design and improvements focus on four broad areas:

- Site selection
- Energy Use
- Indoor Environmental Quality and
- Integrated Design

For an existing community health center, the easiest way to implement green design principles may be with a program to reduce energy consumption. Local utility companies may offer energy audits and ideas on how to reduce energy consumption. In some situations utility companies may offer rebates for the purchase and installation of energy efficient equipment.

Common, increasingly cost-effective ways to reduce energy costs in a health center include re-lamping throughout a facility with energy efficient bulbs and ballasts and with light fixtures designed to deliver light more efficiently. In some instances, designers are reducing foot-candles available at working surfaces. Other energy saving strategies that win LEED points are motion sensors which automatically turn lights on when you enter a room and turn them off after a period of inactivity. Most of these strategies are cost-effective for long-term tenants as well as building owners.

For existing facilities undergoing more significant renovations and for new construction, other readily available energy-saving strategies include motion sensitive faucets for hand washing, waterless urinals and double-flush toilets. The new USGBC health care standard requires hospitals and other large institutional users to look especially carefully at water use. At these facilities, for instance, designers will no longer use potable water to cool equipment, and will seek to recover condensate from HVAC systems to use for other purposes, thus reducing the overall demand for water.

Generations Family Health Center in Willimantic, CT, is exemplary in its use of green building strategies. They will use geo-thermal heat — essentially warm air piped from deep underground — to be largely independent of conventional utility services for heating their facility.

Generous use of natural light has been a fundamental tenet of green design since the movement started, and is a feature of good design for staff and patients generally. For new construction, effective use of natural light may involve consideration of how a building is sited and the type of glass installed. Special glass can reduce thermal transmission and the heat load on your building, thus reducing the need for air conditioning.

The use of natural light and development of connections to the outdoors receive special attention in the new LEED standard. Proponents of evidence-based design believe that providing health care patients and staff with direct access to nature promotes healing. Under the LEED-HC standard, building designers (and those making significant alterations) are encouraged to provide views to a natural setting and direct access to a terrace, garden, balcony or courtyard. These are all traditional design elements that can be integrated cost-effectively in urban and rural settings alike.

Settlement Health Center in the East Harlem section of New York City incorporated an outdoor terrace immediately adjacent to its community room when it built a new facility some years ago. This, and effective use of natural light in an entrance atrium, are examples of green design strategies that help create a positive environment for patients and that can strengthen the image of community health centers as **providers of choice**.

A new feature of the LEED-HC standard also encourages health care facilities to improve the acoustical environment and eliminate noisy intrusions that may deter patient recovery. While this is intended for hospitals, long-term care facilities and other residences, it applies to community health centers as well. One of our clients involved in redesigning their front-end process decided to eliminate televisions from the waiting room. They determined that most TV content does not promote sensations of peace or well being for patients.

In recent years, the cost of implementing green design strategies has become more competitive with conventional building practices and materials. Some industry observers now estimate just a 2% — 6% premium. Even if you never seek LEED or other certification and implement only a few elements of green design in an interior alteration, you may find that you can reduce operating costs, build goodwill with staff and patients, and promote a more healthful environment.



TOP: Generations Family Health Center, MIDDLE and BOTTOM: Settlement Health Center

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