

Just Start: Karen Glatfelter's Approach to Change-Making

When Karen Glatfelter started the Diploma in Climate Medicine, she wasn't looking for a new career path. She wasn't trying to become a sustainability expert, lead a hospital initiative, or build a cross-disciplinary team.

In fact, "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do at all," she says. "I just knew I wanted to do something."

Today, Glatfelter, a family medicine physician and hospitalist at Merrimack Health Lawrence Hospital in Massachusetts, has helped get a long list of sustainability projects off the ground, from reducing waste and changing medication practices to improving recycling and finding practical ways to make hospital operations less resource-intensive. Her hospital has earned Joint Commission Sustainable Healthcare Certification, and a Green Team that once consisted of two physicians now draws participants from across the organization.

Looking back, she can't point to a moment when someone tapped her on the shoulder and said, "You're in charge of sustainability now." Mostly, she noticed things that could work better, asked a lot of questions, and followed ideas to see where they went.



Karen Glatfelter and a colleague counting bags of waste at the hospital loading dock.

"It really is a matter of curiosity and persistence and trying different things," she says. "I don't feel like I have to be an expert."

Her interest in sustainability began while living in Oaxaca, Mexico, where she became more aware of how resourceful communities can be with the materials and resources around them. She remembers noticing how little went to waste. Corn wasn't just food. Different parts of the plant had different purposes, and by the end of the growing season, nearly everything had been used for something. Around the same time, flooding and other environmental changes made the connection between climate and daily life feel a lot less abstract.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many healthcare professionals, Glatfelter found herself exhausted and questioning what role she could play in addressing complex challenges. She began looking for ways to contribute beyond her daily clinical work. Somewhere along the way, that search led her to the Diploma in Climate Medicine.

The turning point came during the Sustainable Healthcare Certificate. "Right away, I thought, oh, this is something I could actually do," she says. "I can identify a problem and come up with a solution."

During the course, she talked with faculty and peers about what sustainability looked like at her hospital. "I wondered, how do I do this? We have nothing. Our hospital hasn't done sustainability work. I really want to just do something."

What happened next still surprises her. She went back to her hospital and pitched an idea to leadership. "It was the first time I had ever done anything like that," she says. "But it worked."

To her surprise, hospital leaders were supportive, even if nobody was quite sure what sustainability work would actually look like at their organization. "They asked, 'Can you calculate all the emissions for the hospital? Do you think three months would be okay?'" she recalls. "I knew there was no way that that was going to happen. But I thought, I'll take whatever they give me."

Rather than getting stuck on the enormity of the task, she started looking for projects that were manageable. One involved a small amount of the anesthetic gas desflurane still being used in the operating room. "It was just a couple emails," she says. She asked anesthesiologists whether they needed it. They didn't. She talked to the pharmacy. They agreed. The product was eliminated.

Another idea came from a nurse who suggested switching from single-use insulin vials to multi-use vials. The team reviewed the evidence, talked with pharmacy leadership, and tried it. "It saves a boatload of money," the nurse had told her. The change reduced waste and generated savings at the same time.

Then came a waste audit. Glatfelter, another physician, and several residents spent time standing at the loading dock counting bags of waste. It wasn't glamorous work. "Our COO looked at the pictures and was like, 'Oh, these guys are serious.'"

One project led to another. Some focused on waste. Others focused on medications or operational efficiencies. One of the most successful involved inpatient inhalers. After understanding the negative environmental impacts of inhaler propellants, pharmacy and respiratory therapy teams created a system where lower-emission nebulized medications and dry powder inhalers became the default option when clinically appropriate. What she likes most about that project is how little it asked of clinicians.

"I don't even think the providers noticed, to be honest," she says.

The system was designed so providers could continue ordering medications the same way they always had while pharmacy and respiratory therapy handled the substitutions behind the scenes. Over time, the hospital reduced inhaler-related emissions dramatically while maintaining patient care and avoiding additional burden on staff.



Karen and members of the Green Team promoting sustainability education.



*Karen Glatfelter, MD and green team co-leader
Laura Gould, MD show off their team shirts.*

Somewhere in the middle of all this, other people started joining in. For a long time, sustainability efforts at the hospital were essentially Glatfelter and one physician colleague. Then a few people asked to join. Those people invited others.

Eventually nurses, data analysts, purchasing and supply chain, quality and regulation compliance, and human resources professionals started participating as well.

The Green Team shirts helped. "They look so cool that I've had a few people join because they're like, 'Where do I get one of those shirts?'" she says. "I'll get you one, but you've got to join. That's the price."

One thing Karen wishes more people understood is that you don't have to know everything before you begin. "When I started, I knew nothing. Really nothing," she says. "I still don't know a lot, but I know something," and that's taken a lot of pressure off.

She doesn't feel like she has to have all the answers, or become an expert in every corner of sustainability. What she can do is focus on the place where she has experience and influence. "I do know a little bit about community hospitals and healthcare," she says. "And climate change, and what we could do better."

It has changed the way she thinks about her career. "A couple years ago, I was pretty close to walking away from medicine entirely," she says. Today, sustainability work has become "the most fun part of my job."

When her children talk about what she does, their descriptions vary. Sometimes they roll their eyes and ask, "Mom, are you counting gloves again?" Other times they put it differently. They'll say, "Mom's doing her saving-the-world stuff."

The reality is, she never set out to become a sustainability leader. She just kept spotting things that could work better and deciding to see if they could be fixed. Most of the time, that meant asking questions, finding a few people who were interested, and giving an idea a shot. It wasn't a master plan. It was more of a habit.

"Let's try something," she says. "Let's see what happens."

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