

A 10-STEP GUIDE TO A MORE SUSTAINABLE HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATION

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Commission on Accreditation
of Healthcare Management Education



FORWARD





Al Faber

Board Member, Interim President and CEO
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“This fellowship empowers emerging healthcare leaders to drive meaningful improvements in health outcomes for patients and their communities worldwide.”

***— Jonathan B. Perlin, MD, PhD
president and chief executive officer
Joint Commission and Joint Commission International***

The Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME) and Joint Commission recognize that sustainability, a highly educated workforce, and a focus on healthcare quality and safety are essential to improving the health and well-being of communities.

In alignment with CAHME's mission to advance the quality of healthcare management education, we partnered with Joint Commission to create the CAHME/Joint Commission Fellowship Award for Advancing Sustainable Health Care. This one-year fellowship offers a graduating student from a CAHME-accredited program an immersive experience at Joint Commission, applying sustainability principles to healthcare leadership in real-world settings.

This fellowship is built on the shared commitment of CAHME and Joint Commission to education, leadership, and quality in healthcare. By connecting academic preparation with practical experience, this partnership equips future leaders to implement sustainable solutions that improve organizational performance and community health.

I want to personally thank Joint Commission for their partnership and their impact as a CAHME Awards sponsor. Their collaboration reinforces the vital connection between education and practice, helping us prepare the next generation of healthcare leaders.

This white paper, authored by inaugural Fellow Sadie Joba, MS-HSM, and Kevin Zacharyasz, M.En, Global Director of Healthcare Sustainability at Joint Commission, reflects the results of this collaboration and provides actionable insights for advancing sustainable healthcare leadership.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Joint Commission.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION



Background:

It is imperative that all communities have access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment. By optimizing the resources needed to provide safe, high-quality care, healthcare organizations can effectively manage a growing array of environmental threats and improve patient outcomes. In addition, healthcare organizations can create healthier environments for their populations by decreasing waste, reducing emissions, and improving air quality.

Healthcare delivery has historically been highly energy- and waste-intensive, contributing significantly to the health sector's overall environmental footprint. In fact, data suggests the global healthcare sector produces between 4.4% and 5.2% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. If the sector were a country, it would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet¹.

Resilience-based patient safety practices are essential for maintaining consistent, high-quality care and safety during both routine operations and emergency responses. These practices focus on building the capacity of healthcare systems to anticipate, adapt to, and recover from disruptions—such as extreme weather events, pandemics, or system failures—while continuing to protect patient safety and deliver effective care.

Extreme weather events are on the rise, such as heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, floods, tornados, tropical storms, and hurricanes. Environmental impacts disproportionately affect vulnerable populations throughout the world. The surge in these environmental events heightens the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, injuries, mental health challenges, the spread of infectious food- and water-borne illnesses, and premature death². Sustainable healthcare practices enable organizations to implement projects that effectively mitigate the toll of environmental events and natural disasters, ensuring continuity of care and supporting recovery efforts within affected communities.

When organizations take steps to implement more sustainable practices and enhance their resilience, they not only improve the health of both people and planet, but often improve their bottom line.





Introduction:

Sustainability is one of those areas that can quickly become overwhelming. From energy and waste to air quality and... scope emissions, the sheer volume of factors is enough to instill trepidation.

To foster a culture of change within an organization, it is critical to have buy-in from all levels, including the executive leadership team, operational staff, and everyone in between. But how do you do that? Where do you even get started?

Starting is probably the most difficult part. As humans, we tend to get paralyzed when overloaded with information. Start with an achievable goal and keep building momentum. Eventually, you will be implementing a well-run sustainability machine.

Many healthcare organizations have successfully adopted more sustainable practices that are paying real dividends. By collaborating and learning from one another, we can drive significant change toward a more sustainable healthcare sector.

So, what exactly are the ingredients of a durable sustainability plan? We've outlined 10 essential components below based on our experiences in different healthcare settings. Each one plays an important role in solidifying sustainability as an organizational priority, crucial for success.

1. Start with a Collective Vision and Formal Strategic Plan

2. Hire a Sustainability Leader

3. Identify an Executive Sponsor (C-Suite)

4. Implement a Sustainability Governance Structure

5. Gather Data

6. Educate and Engage the Workforce

7. Form Peer Network Groups and Industry Collaboration

8. Establish Community Partnerships

9. Build Resilience

10. Celebrate Every Win

Remember, even if you haven't begun, it's not too late – you can start now by taking the following steps.

10 STEPS





1: Start with a Collective Vision and Formal Strategic Plan

Any successful program begins with a collective vision and goal. This shared direction ensures alignment across all facets of the organization. Typically, this will start with your sustainability champions and those at the operational level.

A strong first step is to gather insight from departments across the organization about what matters most to them. This collaborative approach helps shape a vision that reflects the organization's values and fosters a sense of shared purpose from the onset. It's necessary to engage not only those who will lead implementation, but other stakeholders to ensure all voices are heard during this process.

By identifying and empowering sustainability champions, your organization can effectively drive culture change and maintain momentum. Using that momentum, the next step is to develop a strategic plan that identifies clear, achievable goals supported by concrete metrics for success. A component of this planning process is conducting a comprehensive assessment of current sustainability-related data. This includes evaluating energy and water usage, waste generation, procurement practices, and emissions data across departments. These insights provide a baseline that enables administrators to establish targeted, actionable goals aligned with operational priorities and regulatory expectations, ensuring that sustainability efforts are both measurable and impactful.

Performance improvement serves as an indispensable driver of sustainability initiatives by enhancing operational efficiencies, optimizing resource utilization, and reducing costs. Targeted efforts in areas such as energy management, waste reduction, and supply chain optimization enable organizations to significantly lower their environmental footprint while simultaneously strengthening system resilience. By streamlining workflows and integrating innovative technologies—such as real-time energy monitoring systems, high-efficiency HVAC units, and waste-to-energy solutions—healthcare facilities can reduce resource consumption, improve operational agility, and support long-term adaptability. This integrated approach ensures that sustainability efforts are not only environmentally responsible but also economically sound, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Ultimately, aligning performance improvement with your strategic plan embeds resilience into daily operations and positions the organization for enduring success.

2: Hire a Sustainability Leader

The work of sustainability has many nuances and intricacies. It truly reaches all departments and facets of an organization. It is important to have a leader who can effectively translate this information into digestible details that are easily understood across the organization—from senior executives to frontline staff. Without a leader, navigating the complexities of sustainability becomes challenging. Additionally, this approach helps to dismantle silos and ensures that sustainability is managed through a central department.

A key responsibility of the sustainability leader includes overseeing the development of an annual sustainability report—whether internal or public-facing—that outlines progress towards established goals and reflects the organization's values and culture. This report serves as a tool for transparency, performance tracking, and stakeholder engagement.

Ideally, your sustainability leader would report to the executive leadership team, ensuring visibility at the highest levels of decision-making. This central voice facilitates the integration of sustainability into other aspects of the organization, such as purchasing and supply chain.

By hiring a sustainability leader to break down silos and consolidate sustainability efforts, the organization gains a central voice that can lead and implement its collective sustainability vision and goals.

3: Identify an Executive Sponsor (C-Suite)

An executive sponsor plays a crucial role in championing sustainability initiatives within a healthcare organization. Typically, a member of the C-suite, such as a Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, or Chief Sustainability Officer, this leader serves as the formal advocate for sustainability. Their involvement ensures that sustainability is embedded in the organization's mission, strategic planning, and decision-making processes.

By aligning sustainability initiatives with broader organizational goals, the executive sponsor provides strategic direction and mobilizes resources. They bridge sustainability efforts with board-level priorities, ensuring that progress, challenges, and opportunities are clearly communicated and aligned with the organization's vision. Through active participation in executive and board discussions, they help establish measurable goals, foster accountability, and promote cross-departmental collaboration. Their leadership is essential to institutionalizing sustainability and driving long-term, meaningful change.



Sustainability Efforts at the Board Level

Embedding sustainability into board governance reinforces its strategic significance. Including it as a standing agenda item—at least biannually—creates a formal platform for oversight, discussion, and decision-making. Establishing a dedicated sustainability governance structure that reports directly to the board enhances transparency, accountability, and alignment with organizational priorities.

To further embed sustainability into leadership, organizations can link ESG performance to executive compensation. This alignment creates incentives that drive commitment and action. By integrating sustainability into governance, planning, reporting, and performance evaluation, healthcare organizations can ensure that environmental responsibility becomes a core leadership priority and a catalyst for lasting impact.

4: Implement a Sustainability Governance Structure

A sustainability governance structure is a network of internal employees led by the organization's sustainability leader, along with an executive sponsor. This structure is most effective when adopting a charter that identifies the group's vision, roles, responsibilities, structural elements, and meeting schedule.

A robust governance structure ensures sustainability efforts are deeply rooted across an organization, permeating every aspect of the business, fostering a culture of responsibility and accountability. By strengthening internal channels of engagement with cross-departmental leaders, the organization can facilitate collaboration, drive innovation, and ensure sustainability goals are aligned with the overall strategic objectives. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of sustainability efforts but also promotes a unified commitment throughout the organization.



5: Gather Data

Data collection is pivotal. By systematically gathering and analyzing data, organizations can pinpoint areas needing improvement, such as resource inefficiencies or operational impacts. For instance, organizations may identify that specific areas within their facilities consume disproportionately high levels of energy and resources. This insight enables the establishment of clear, measurable objectives that promote progress, enhance accountability, and generate financial savings. Furthermore, data collection offers valuable guidance for future initiatives, so that efforts are aligned with sustainability objectives and continuously optimized for better outcomes. Ultimately, robust data collection empowers organizations to make strategic, impactful decisions that lead to lasting change.

A compelling example is Valley Children's Healthcare, which used detailed energy data to guide the development of a solar-powered microgrid. Once operational, the system is expected to meet 80% of the hospital's energy needs and generate an estimated \$15 million in savings over 25 years. This data-informed investment not only enhances energy resilience and operational reliability but also aligns with sustainability and cost-reduction goals—demonstrating how strategic data use can drive impactful, future-ready infrastructure decisions³.

6: Educate and Engage the Workforce

Educating the healthcare workforce and future leaders establishes the foundation for integrating sustainability into daily operations and long-term strategy. When individuals across an organization understand the environmental impacts of healthcare and are equipped with practical tools to reduce waste, conserve resources, and make informed decisions, they are more likely to engage in meaningful sustainability efforts. Education should be ongoing, accessible, and tailored to different roles, covering topics such as energy efficiency, sustainable procurement, water conservation, and the broader environmental footprint of healthcare delivery.

Incorporating sustainability within onboarding material and annual employee training modules presents an opportunity for healthcare organizations to reinforce the intrinsic link between environmental stewardship, patient care, safety, and overall organizational performance.

Internal Communication Plan

An effective internal communication plan is an organization's compass for engaging staff at all levels, not only for sustainability but for every aspect of the organization. Led by the sustainability governing body, this plan should promote transparency by regularly sharing goals, progress, and performance data. When employees understand how their roles contribute to sustainability initiatives, they are more likely to feel connected and motivated. Communication should be clear, consistent, and accessible, delivered through channels like newsletters, staff meetings, or internal platforms.

Transparent communication fosters positive behavior change within an organization. By openly sharing sustainability goals, progress, and achievements, organizations can build trust and accountability among employees. This transparency strengthens internal engagement mechanisms, encouraging collaboration and innovation across departments. Moreover, it helps to embed sustainability into the organizational culture, making it a core value that guides decision-making and daily operations.

NYC Health + Hospitals is embedding climate resilience into its 10-year capital plan, reinforcing infrastructure to withstand extreme weather while reducing emissions. Projects include flood barriers, green infrastructure, upgraded HVAC and backup power systems, and a shift to cleaner energy sources. The new Ruth Bader Ginsburg Hospital, built to endure a 500-year storm, exemplifies this dual focus. These efforts have already cut carbon emissions by 30% since 2006, with a goal of 50% by 2030—demonstrating how resilience and sustainability can be achieved together⁷.



HOSPITAL

7: Form Peer Network Groups and Industry Collaboration

Collaboration is one of the most effective drivers of change. Healthcare sustainability requires engagement and partnerships across the entire sector, as well as with industry stakeholders such as employers, regulators, and community-based organizations. Engaging with these partners enables organizations to exchange best practices and lessons learned while building on proven strategies to advance efforts moving forward. These relationships foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, helping organizations stay informed on emerging trends and evolving regulatory developments. Collaborative learning environments also offer valuable opportunities for healthcare organizations to benchmark, problem-solve, and gain insight into what has worked—or not worked—for others.



A strong example of this collaborative approach is the Ohio Hospital Association's Energy & Sustainability Program, which brings together hospitals across the state through its Environmental Leadership Council. This peer network facilitates shared learning, technical assistance, and strategic alignment on sustainability goals. Through initiatives like the Sustainability in Scrubs newsletter and ENERGY STAR recognition programs, the Council empowers healthcare leaders to exchange insights, celebrate progress, and collectively address challenges. In 2024 alone, participating hospitals saved over \$7.4 million in utility costs—demonstrating the tangible benefits of coordinated action and knowledge sharing⁵.

To achieve the most impactful and lasting outcomes, organizations must look beyond their own experiences. Sustainability in healthcare is not an isolated effort—it is a shared responsibility that requires collective learning and action. Drawing from the knowledge and experiences of others strengthens an organization's ability to lead effectively and contribute to a more resilient, sustainable healthcare system.



8: Establish Community Partnerships

Developing strong community partnerships extends the reach and impact of healthcare sustainability efforts. By collaborating with local governments, nonprofits, schools, and other community stakeholders, healthcare organizations can support initiatives that address both environmental and public health challenges in meaningful ways.

Community Events

Organizing community events is a powerful method to engage the public in sustainability efforts while fostering a sense of shared responsibility. Activities such as neighborhood cleanups and tree-planting events provide hands-on opportunities for people to contribute. These events can help reduce waste, improve air quality, mitigate urban heat islands, and enhance green spaces—all of which have direct health benefits. For healthcare organizations, participating in or hosting these events demonstrates leadership and reinforces commitment to environmental and population health.

UPMC has actively supported such initiatives by co-sponsoring the Pennsylvania Resource Council's household hazardous waste collections and community-based reusable material collection events in select communities over multiple years⁶.

Community Education Programs

Community education programs provide awareness on the correlation between the environment and health outcomes. These programs can include curriculums such as workshops on sustainable living, informational sessions on environmental health risks, and school-based initiatives that teach students about environmentally conscious practices. Tailoring content to the specific needs and demographics of the community ensures that the information taught is both relevant and actionable.

9: Build Resilience

Resilience and decarbonization are interdependent. Effective decarbonization strategies can enhance an organization's resilience. For example, implementing energy efficiency projects or transitioning to renewable energy sources not only reduces emissions but also decreases reliance on the energy grid, making a facility less vulnerable to things like price fluctuations and supply disruptions.

Sustainable practices, like green infrastructure, including urban forests, public green spaces, and permeable pavements, can improve community resilience to more frequent natural disasters like flooding, wildfires, heatwaves, and severe storms, while also contributing to lower carbon emissions.

Organizations should ensure their facilities have emergency and natural disaster preparedness plans. Implementing flexible strategies that can evolve with new information and changing conditions allows for adjustments as both environmental impacts and technological solutions develop.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Understanding the trends in the frequency of natural disasters is a pivotal step—not only for discerning shifting patterns, but also for evaluating the ramifications of these changes on the communities we serve.

Given the range of localized weather phenomena experienced across different regions globally, it is imperative to analyze data trends meticulously. This analysis will inform the development of bespoke resilience strategies that address specific environmental challenges unique to each locality. Such proactive planning serves as a foundation for enhancing resilience, promoting sustainability, safeguarding community health, and ensuring patient safety within hospital settings.



Proactive Preparation and Training

Proactive preparation, including risk assessments and regular training, is central to maintaining patient safety during disasters. Facilities need to continuously assess the evolving risk factors facing their communities to determine preparation strategies. Preparation plans can be scaled by establishing standardized training programs and risk-assessment tools that can be adapted to different regions and disaster types. Continuous education and simulation exercises prepare healthcare staff for real-world scenarios, ensuring they are equipped to handle emergencies effectively.

Partnerships and Resource Utilization

Effective partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and international organizations can enhance resource utilization and response coordination. It is important to partner with the right suppliers and partner organizations to enhance your facility's resilience. Enhancing resource accessibility in healthcare settings can be achieved by diversifying supply chains to secure vital equipment like generators. Additionally, partnering with meteorological service providers offers significant advantages. These collaborations enable precise weather forecasting, aiding in informed decision-making and potentially preventing unnecessary facility challenges and evacuations.

Technology and Innovation

Leveraging technology for early warning systems, telemedicine, and data analytics can improve patient safety and response efficiency. It is also important to invest in scalable technology solutions that can be adapted to various healthcare settings and resource levels.

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Community Engagement

Engaging communities in disaster preparedness and response efforts ensures that local needs and capacities are addressed. This involves developing community-based programs that empower local populations to actively participate in disaster response and recovery.

Healthcare organizations play a key role in developing and supporting community-wide emergency management plans. By collaborating with local emergency services, public health departments, and community leaders, these organizations can help ensure that plans are inclusive, well-coordinated, and responsive to local risks. Proactive planning protects vulnerable populations, maintaining continuity of care, and strengthens the healthcare organization's ability to respond effectively to crises.



10: Celebrate Every Win

Finally, make sure to celebrate your sustainability wins.

Celebrations are powerful motivators, helping individual teams and core contributors feel valued and connected to the broader mission. Celebrations can be as simple as shoutouts in weekly meetings, or as formal as official recognition events highlighting organizational wins throughout the year. These efforts not only highlight progress but also create opportunities to share success stories and inspire broader collaboration.

Conclusion

The path to sustainable healthcare is undoubtedly complex, involving numerous stakeholders, intricate planning, and continuous adaptation. Sustainability efforts truly reach all aspects of an organization from energy and waste-management to air quality, transportation, and supply chain. By securing buy-in from all levels—including executive leadership teams, operational staff, and clinical teams—healthcare organizations can inspire innovation, drive efficiency, and build resilience.

Healthcare sustainability is a commitment to the future—a future where health systems are resilient, communities are healthier, and the planet is protected. It is a vision of a world where healthcare not only heals but also nurtures the environment, creating a legacy of well-being for generations to come. Through collective effort and commitment, the healthcare sector can lead the way in building a sustainable and healthy future for all.

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CAHME Corporate Sponsors



CAHME and Joint Commission recognize that sustainability, a highly educated workforce, and a steadfast commitment to healthcare quality and safety are foundational to advancing the health and well-being of communities. In response to the growing need for leadership at the intersection of these domains, CAHME and Joint Commission have established a distinctive, one-year fellowship program designed to cultivate the next generation of healthcare sustainability leaders.

This prestigious fellowship is awarded to a graduating student from a CAHME-accredited or certified program who has demonstrated a strong commitment to sustainability, healthcare quality and safety, and continuous process improvement.

To learn more about the fellowship visit: cahme.org/awards-scholarships/joint-commission-fellowship-award/

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