

FRESH FROM THE TOP DOWN

HOW ONE FSO IS GROWING BOTH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND 5,300 POUNDS OF PRODUCE WITH ITS NEW ROOFTOP FARM. BY JULIANNE PEPITONE

FOODSERVICE OPERATION OF THE MONTH
Boston Medical Center
 Boston

At Boston Medical Center (BMC), some of the produce is so local that the term “hyperlocal” doesn’t seem accurate enough. To make plans for fresh veggies on the menu, all the chef has to do is look up. The salad fixings, squash and other vegetables are harvested from an on-site, rooftop farm.

In its first year, the 7,000-square-foot farm provided 5,300 pounds of produce, which was used in the hospital’s cafeteria and demonstration kitchen as well as at an on-site food pantry for BMC patients. The hospital expects a similar yield for its 2018 harvest.

“Both patients and staff are amazed to see their food came from a farm literally feet away,” says David Maffeo, who over-



BMC support services leaders, including David Maffeo (second from left), honored staff with a special lunch during Support Services Week.

sees BMC’s foodservice as senior director of support services. “That breeds excitement to try the items, which makes people fill up their plates with healthy food. To me, that alone is massive success.”

That success is due in

large part to Farm Manager Lindsay Allen, whom the hospital hired through rooftop farming group Higher Ground Farm. The plans for the farm moved quickly; it opened just one year after Maffeo first brought the idea to BMC’s senior man-

agement. So Allen’s expertise was crucial.

“I went from getting hired to almost immediately buying the seeds,” Allen says. “So we didn’t get to do as much upfront planning as I would have liked, but we’ve optimized over the

season and learned a ton.”

For other operators considering a rooftop farm, Allen and Maffeo agree the key to success is structural and logistical planning. Access is perhaps the biggest consideration. BMC uses a freight elevator to move

AT A GLANCE
Boston Medical Center
 Boston

5,300
 Pounds of produce harvested from the rooftop farm in its first season

7,000
 Square feet of growing space

NO. 1
 First hospital-based rooftop farm in the state

50%
 Amount by which BMC is aiming to cut its carbon emissions by 2020

pallets of soil-filled crates up to the farm, avoiding the need for a crane. Like most rooftop farms, BMC uses the roof’s existing drainage system, and the staff sets crates on risers to help allow drainage underneath. Other considerations are sun exposure, wind and visibility—plus the roof’s load-bearing capacity. A structural engineer can help determine safety and any additional supports the roof may need.

GREENS FOR THE WIN

Allen focused on building the farm with two core goals in mind: to plant items that yield a lot of produce and are most useful to BMC’s kitchen.

So, for five weeks, she discussed needs and menus as much as possible with foodservice staff, who told her about the constant need for salad bar fixings and fresh herbs. Allen avoided “one-and-done” crops such as broccoli and cabbage, instead favoring salad mix and kale, plus hardy vegetables such as radishes, peppers and large-yield tomatoes.

“You want the kitchen to be excited about the produce, not to see it as something that makes their lives more complicated,” Allen says.

But the team quickly learned a few key lessons they plan to apply next sea-



Farm Manager Lindsay Allen has been key to the success of Boston Medical Center’s rooftop farm.

son. For example, labor-intensive produce is better for the food pantry than the time-strapped kitchen.

“I came in one day with armfuls of green beans, and the staff said, ‘We’re sorry, but do you know how long it would take us to snap all of those?’” Allen says.

In other cases, the lesson was a matter of tweaking the quantity—such as in the case of a major basil bounty.

“Lindsay came to us and said, ‘Well, we have 200 pounds of basil,’” says Maffeo, laughing. “It

worked out; we made a ton of pesto. But it was an aha moment. ... We’re growing for a purpose, and we need to make sure everything is in service of that.”

GROWING THE MISSION

For the upcoming season, Allen is focusing on planting larger amounts of fewer items. She would also like to name an official kitchen-to-farm liaison who would, for example, post cafeteria signage denoting which items are from the farm.

Other initiatives planned

include a weekly farmers market with subsidized items and more inpatient and cafeteria menus created specifically to showcase the farm-fresh produce.

And there’s a long waitlist to volunteer at the farm, Maffeo says.

“The farm is engaging our community, which is the whole point of what we do,” he says. “That excitement spreads, which adds this element of energy into the whole foodservice operation and bonds us to the people we serve.”



DAVID MAFFEO
 Senior Director of Support Services, Boston Medical Center

What are your goals for the year?
 I have a couple of standard

goals every year: to improve the patient experience, to increase the quality of our food and the courtesy of our service, and overall to strive to be better. We’re working on additional education around the farm specifically, getting

more people in our teaching kitchen and expanding some fun offerings like “Iron Chef”-style competitions.

What’s the key to BMC’s success in foodservice?
 It all comes down to two

things: the people and the programs. And of course, the programs are powered by our people, who are so passionate about our mission of improving health for our patients. They’re never satisfied and always strive to be better.

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