

CLIMATE-SMART SUCCESS STORIES

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MCW/FROEDTERT CATALYZES CHANGE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Everything fell into place at the right time. Or so that's the humble sentiment of Healthy Climate Wisconsin (HCW) members Dr. Joanne Bernstein and Alexis Puyleart at the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW).

They are talking about a monumental shift for MCW and Froedtert: **the announcement of the Center for Sustainability, Health, and the Environment (SHE).**

Although it may be difficult to get them to admit it, they both played a pivotal role in this milestone, and they continue to work towards a brighter and healthier future for their

patients in Wisconsin. Alexis, a fourth-year medical student, first felt the call to climate action after a family trip to Alaska. A self-described National Park buff, she found herself swept up in the



Alexis Puyleart & the Medical Students for Sustainability working with Just One More, a food bank that diverts 4.5M lbs of food from the landfill each year.

glorious natural settings, but she was also struck by intense worry. The staggering loss of glaciers, concerns about fish populations for subsistence villages, and unknowns about downstream effects on (her personal favorite) the coastal brown bears all contributed to her resolve for action.



Alexis Puylear, an MCW student entering residency, first connected climate to health after a trip to Alaska.

Upon her return, Alexis began to notice all the ways the changing climate affects human health, but she was perplexed that this was not mentioned in her medical school studies. To get this critical information to more of her fellow students, Alexis helped start a chapter of Medical Students for a Sustainable Future, which laid the groundwork for rallying the student body to call for curriculum changes in a letter-writing campaign. Her success with this campaign put her at the forefront of designing suggested changes in curriculum at

MCW, which brought her to other passionate individuals like Dr. Caitlin Rublee and her “Climate Champions” group. One of these group members would become a mentor and friend: Dr. Joanne Bernstein. The convergence of Alexis and Joanne's efforts marked a turning point for MCW. Their collaboration, fueled by a shared vision and a determination to bridge medicine with sustainability, laid the foundation for change.

Dr. Bernstein is a passionate advocate and mother, who consistently asks herself the question:

“If not me, then who?”

She is driven by the desire to create a better future for her daughters and the next generations.



Dr. Joanne Bernstein is a passionate physician and climate-smart health advocate creating a healthier world for her family and her patients.

Joanne and Alexis, along with a team of other sustainability-minded healthcare professionals, formed a green team and started seeking out tools for change.

Inspired by a team of health professionals at [UPMC in Pittsburgh, who used letter writing to convince their hospital to make ambitious climate goals](#), they began exploring what a similar effort could look like at MCW.



Alexis Puyleart, Dr. Bernstein, and Josh Zaharias before a meeting discussing sustainability with Facilities Operations. Zaharias is an HCW member and a volunteer sustainability leader.

With the support and encouragement of other HCW members, the green team circulated the letter among students, faculty, and even executive members at Froedtert & MCW.

The response was strong, with over 90 doctors, students, and healthcare professionals endorsing the letter within a month.

The letter sent a clear message:

Many key players of the MCW & Froedtert health systems were serious about climate action.



Dr. Bernstein and Dr. Rublee, another green leader at MCW. The two became close friends through HCW and climate advocacy.

The impact of the campaign resonated with the Director of the Institute for Health and Equity (IHE) as well as the dean of the medical school. While these leaders were already familiar with climate and health discussions, they were propelled forward by both the letter and a perfectly-timed highlight of climate change at the 2022 AAMC conference.

A few months later, a new plan was announced. The IHE would add a new Center for Sustainability, Health, and the Environment (SHE).

The letter, it seemed, was the catalyst for this new milestone.

The new SHE Center will serve the Milwaukee community and continue to inform sustainability measures at MCW and Froedtert. The founding director, Dr. Christa Wagner, has a multitude of projects already underway, just months following their launch.

Dr. Wagner shares the broad-reaching goals of the SHE Center and that it, "...aims to encourage and enhance interdisciplinary and inter-campus efforts to build knowledge through research; educate future health and research leaders; be good stewards of the environment; and enhance environmental health literacy in local communities."

One of the SHE Center's first projects will focus on developing green operating rooms (OR). They are creating a "[Green OR Implementation Kit](#)" that will create reductions in carbon emissions from surgical procedures across the Froedtert & MCW health systems.

The center has already been awarded nearly \$50,000 towards the development and implementation of the Green OR kit from the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin (AHW) Endowment.

They also recently secured an [additional \\$500,000 from AHW](#) to develop the Center across all mission areas. Dr. Bernstein is a co-investigator in this endeavor, working on new curriculum for medical students.

With this and other exciting programs, the SHE Center is laying the foundation to support not only their health system, but the Milwaukee community at large. The results of their efforts will provide further insight into what health needs are the most pressing for area residents, and how they can be best addressed.



Dr. Wagner (SHE Center) and Dr. Bernstein educate students about Climate-Smart Healthcare in a talk to first year medical students on February 6, 2024.

The letter-writing campaign not only demonstrated the power of collective voices, but it served to connect health professionals with a shared passion. Many of these colleagues are now working together on initiatives both in their system and beyond!

As Alexis and Joanne reflect on their journey, they offer advice to others interested in climate work: "Go for it!"

They emphasize that one doesn't need to be an expert to get started, as everyone has unique skills to contribute. Alexis adds,

"We often have the fear of not knowing something or looking dumb, but you can jump in and learn as you go. You'll be amazed at what you learn and how quickly. I went from knowing only a little to giving grand rounds [on climate] as a third-year med student."

At its core, Alexis and Joanne's story is not one of two individuals, but a narrative of the transformative power of believing that everyone has a role to play in making the world a better and healthier place.

Together, they've ushered in a new era of sustainability at MCW, leaving an indelible mark on the intersection of health and climate.

The future is bright for this healthcare system as it emerges as a new leader in climate-smart healthcare. 🌿

You can learn more about the SHE Center at: <https://www.mcw.edu/she-center> or follow along (@SHECenterMCW) / X (twitter.com).

INSPIRED TO TAKE CLIMATE-SMART ACTION IN YOUR HEALTH SYSTEM? CHECK OUT OUR LETTER WRITING GUIDE:

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<https://www.healthyclimatewi.org/healthcare>



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