



Cleaner Air Coming to Detroit

Henry Ford Hospital Agrees to Environmental Justice Demands, Plans to Shut Down Incinerator

by Mary Beth Doyle

On February 4, Henry Ford Health Systems announced that it will shut down the incinerator at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. A coalition of community and environmental justice groups, including the Ecology Center, congratulated Henry Ford for their decision, but plan to press for a definitive and expeditious timeline to achieve the shutdown. The coalition has been advocating for to close the incinerator for more than two years.

"Clean air is our priority," said Anna Holden, of the Sierra Club Southeast Michigan group. "We congratulate Henry Ford for responding to community health concerns and making the decision to shut down the incinerator."

Community pressure was a key factor in the decision, as Henry Ford Health System officials themselves admit. Yard signs were prominently placed in neighborhood lawns around the facility. The signs boldly stated in red "Shut it down, Henry Ford." The message was reiterated by hundreds of phone calls and post cards from concerned individuals to Hospital executives, asking that they switch to a less polluting waste disposal method.



Above: Donele Wilkins (right), executive director of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, congratulating Anna Holden, chair of the Sierra Club's Southeast Michigan Group, at the incinerator shutdown victory party. Top right: Protesters pose across the street from Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital during a August 1999 rally against the incinerator. Photo by Molly Chidsey.

Commissioners weighed in on the matter, passing a resolution in December asking Henry Ford Hospital to limit the waste they incinerate to pathological and chemotherapy waste alone.

"I became involved in response to a constituency outcry," said the resolution's author, Wayne County Commissioner Jewel Ware. "I commend Henry Ford Hospital for their efforts to work with the community, however, we still await a phase-out plan. It is essential to move quickly to reduce air pollution in the community."

Henry Ford Hospital joins the University of Michigan Health System and other hospitals around the state who have made the commitment to stop incinerating waste, and to switch to safer waste disposal alternatives.

"The community will breathe easier when this incinerator is shut down," said James Williams, member of the Virginia Park District Council and a neighborhood resident.

The coalition raised environmental

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The coalition organized a series of rallies in front of the hospital. At the November rally, held on the same day as the Great American Smoke-Out, activists raised a banner at the Sweet Home Baptist Church across the street, asking Henry Ford to "stop smoking." This banner remained hanging across the street from the hospital for over two months.

The Wayne County Board of



Jewel Ware, Wayne County Commissioner, raised the profile of the controversy by authoring an anti-incineration resolution which passed the Board in December.

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justice considerations about the facility. Henry Ford Health System had stopped incinerating at its suburban hospitals, but continued to burn at its Detroit facility, which is located in a community of color which already suffers very high asthma levels.

“Henry Ford’s commitment to shut down the incinerator is a great step towards achieving environmental justice in the city of Detroit,” said Donele Wilkins, executive director of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. “We hope this will serve as an example to other companies in the city, including the commercial medical waste incinerator in Hamtramck.”

Alternatives to incineration have been shown to be cost-effective and less polluting. Other major hospitals have made the transition from on-site incineration to alternative technologies in a matter of months. The coalition believes that Henry Ford Hospital will be able to do the same.

Coalition members include Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, Sierra Club Southeast Michigan

Chapter, Sierra Club Mackinac Chapter, Ecology Center, National Lawyers Guild/Sugar Law Center, ACCESS, Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, National Wildlife Federation, the Virginia Park

District Council, and Jewel Ware, Wayne County Commissioner.

Mary Beth Doyle, is the Ecology Center’s Environmental Health Campaign Director.



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