Health care, LEED and healing the planet

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The LEED Gold-certified Kaiser Westside Medical Center in Hillsboro, Ore. Credit: Kaiser Permanente

Last week, the U.S. Green Building Council joined Kaiser Permanente in Hillsboro, Ore., to put a LEED Gold plaque on our Westside Medical Center.

Kaiser Permanente has achieved LEED certification for other buildings in the past, but this was the first LEED Gold rating we've earned for a hospital, which, with around-the-clock operations, highly specialized medical equipment and strict regulatory oversight, is more complicated to build and operate than another type of structure. It won't be the last.

Accepting that hefty LEED plaque was a celebratory moment for Kaiser Permanente and our business partners who helped design and construct this sustainable hospital. When it opens in August, Westside will receive 70 percent of its power from clean energy. It will use 6.5 million fewer gallons of water each year than conventional hospitals. The parking structure is energy net zero, thanks, in part, to a 100 kW solar photovoltaic array on its roof, and the structure's giant vertical gardens are irrigated with rainwater.

Other green features that helped our newest hospital earn LEED points include products and materials free of formaldehyde, and a minimum use of lead, copper, PVC or mercury. The open campus offers easy access to public transit stops and includes lockable bike storage to encourage active transportation.

While celebrating our newest hospital's achievement, we publically announced Kaiser Permanente would seek a minimum of LEED Gold certification for new construction of all our new hospitals, large medical offices and other major construction projects going forward. It's a substantial commitment expected to affect roughly 100 buildings, or some 11 million square feet of space, over the next decade.

A LEED plaque means many things. It is an internationally recognized symbol of a well-designed building. It demonstrates Kaiser Permanente's commitment to the environment as an extension of our mission for total health. We see sustainability as a health issue. As a health care provider to 9 million people, we think it is important to do what we can to reduce our carbon footprint and mitigate the effects of climate change on human health.

But, as an architect and facilities executive with many years in the business, embracing LEED certification for all new construction is evidence to me of a major shift in our approach to the built environment. Pioneers in the green building movement have long advocated for a lifecycle approach to facilities, because it encourages a more holistic view of facilities' performance to include health care outcomes, employee recruitment and retention, energy and water savings and mechanical performance as measures of success. It shifts the focus from a building's first cost to the cost of operating that building over its lifetime, which is always far more significant. Naturally, this encourages better building decisions.

Our Westside hospital is a perfect example that when LEED is included from the beginning as an integral part of the design process, the result is a sustainable building at little added cost. Westside Medical Center achieved LEED Gold certification for a net additional cost of less than 1 percent of the total cost of construction, and those additional upfront costs are expected to pay back fivefold in operational savings over the medical center's lifetime.

Kaiser Permanente has embraced LEED because the program provides strict direction for reaching our energy and sustainability goals. We hope that as more of our medical centers carry the plaque, we will build momentum for healthier

buildings of all kinds, and encourage owners to measure building decisions not only by their economic value, but also their effect on people and the environment.

Donald Orndoff
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2 comments

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Heather Marquard - LEED Faculty - AIA - AP BDC CI EBOM
1 year 11 weeks ago
Architect USGBC Faculty, Greenscape, LLC
Pro Reviewer

This is great news! I really hope Kaiser continues the charge by publishing the actual measurements of the building once it goes operational - good, bad or ugly, we need the lessons learned! (Preferably the potholes along with the celebrations, so we can all avoid them on our next ventures!) Thanks!

Danny Peng
1 year 12 weeks ago
Marketing Manager, Greenshine New Energy LLC

That's really useful news.

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