

CASE STUDY

Green & Healthy Events and Meetings: Greening Decentralized Purchasing to Implement a Climate Action Plan

Alameda County

Submitted by Sarah Church



Abstract

Alameda County's ambitious ten-year Climate Action Plan for Government Services and Operations is, after five years of hard work and collaboration, on track to achieve the 2020 goal of a minimum 15% reduction in operational greenhouse gas emissions. Full implementation will require significant culture shifts in the County, including the purchasing choices of decentralized divisions and employees as they plan the many meetings and events crucial to serving our community. Food and beverage purchasing, paper and supplies ordering, business travel, and waste generation are all impacted by how events and meetings are conducted. These behaviors are difficult to shift, as decision-making about them is decentralized across the entire organization.

To address this challenge, a cross-agency team with input from employee purchasers developed planning resources and a certification checklist that can be applied to a broad range of events and meetings. The resulting **Green & Healthy events and meetings** program was promoted through an employee engagement campaign that used community-based social marketing approaches to garner attention and foster behavior change. This innovative program has meaningfully engaged hundreds of event planners and over 18,000 event participants to build a new county culture of sustainable and healthy gatherings.

Goals

Overview

Goals	Strategies	Results
Develop a framework for climate-friendly events and meetings at the County, in order to reduce environmental impacts of decentralized purchasing choices	Engage a cross-agency team of employees to design a framework accessible to all	“Green & Healthy Events & Meetings” certification program for events and meetings developed and piloted with 13 events
Engage employees across the county – including all 20 Alameda County agencies – to participate in the program and certify meetings & events as Green & Healthy	Build a county-wide employee engagement initiative called the “Green & Healthy Awards” to celebrate event planners that certified events in a six-week period	192 events and meetings certified within six weeks, introducing over 9,200 attendees to green & healthy practices in action; each of 20 agencies certified events, and each had at least one employee award winner

Overarching Goal: Implement the Climate Action Plan

Alameda County’s ambitious ten-year Climate Action Plan for Government Services and Operations aims for a 2020 goal of a minimum 15% reduction in operational greenhouse gas emissions. Initial successes came from actions that could be implemented by one agency, such as green building or fleet vehicle efficiency. But to achieve reduction goals, more distributed emissions sources that result from employee behaviors had to be addressed. This also means tackling organizational culture change. For example, our virtual meeting system can only reduce business travel if employees do not feel cultural pressure to attend meetings in person. Without widespread engagement of the County’s 9500 employees, many of the emissions reduction strategies laid out in the plan cannot meet their potential.

Program Goal 1: Develop a Framework for Climate-Friendly Events and Meetings

In order to effectively engage employees in culture change, the Sustainability Program welcomed them into the process of devising climate action strategies, in **cross-agency teams**. One team developed a certification for events and meetings, which brought together every day operational sustainability shifts into a single, actionable checklist for employees to use when planning any gathering, from a weekly staff meeting to a large

community expo. Each required or recommended “eco-action” advances the Climate Action Plan. For example, a prohibition on bottled water at events helps us reduce the climate impact of our supply chain and reduce inputs to our waste stream.



Quantified Impact

Sharing the environmental impact of event-related actions through infographics helped to communicate the importance of certification.

Program Goal 2: Scale Up to Change Behavior County-Wide

The certification and other employee-focused strategies were well-received, but **many remained unaware of sustainability programs or how to take part.**

Therefore, a series of employee engagement initiatives were designed, with Green & Healthy events and meetings as the first topic. To ramp up awareness of the certification, and address perceived barriers, the Sustainability Program launched **the Green & Healthy Awards**, a six-week contest designed to recognize and celebrate employees that certified events and meetings through the program. Participation of all 20 County agencies was also a goal. Internal environmental impact calculations for event metrics provided cumulative impact figures for reduction in resource use associated with the changed purchasing decisions.



Scaling Up Through Tailored Promotion

The Green & Healthy Awards celebrated event planners that chose to certify their events as Green & Healthy in a 2-week contest.

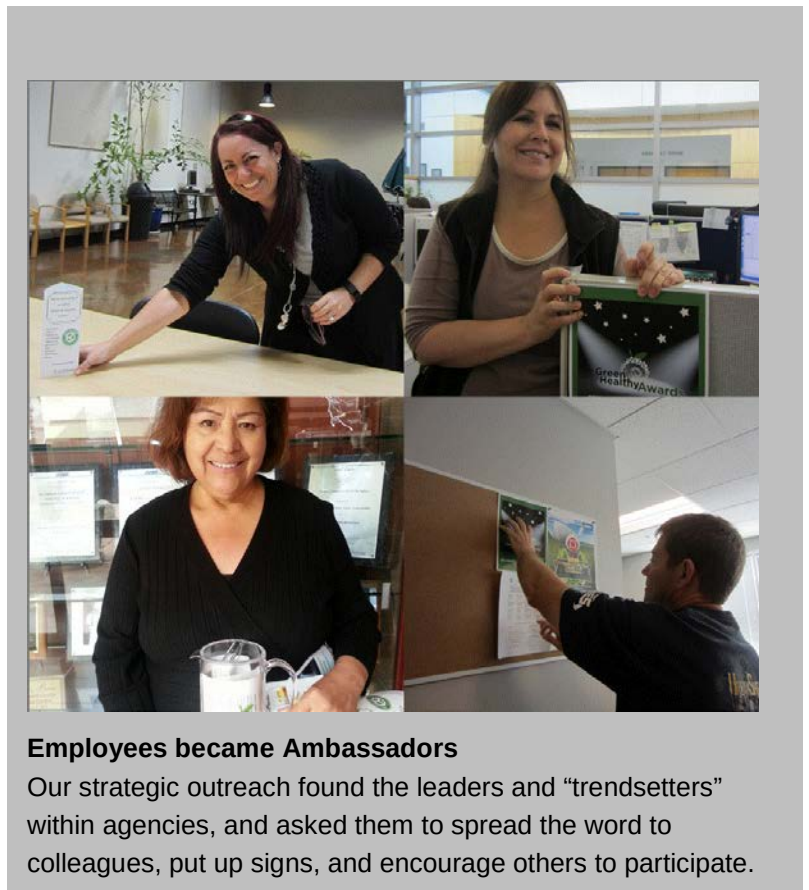
Strategies (Activities)

To encourage decentralized event planners throughout the county to adopt sustainable practices, it was important to a) **open two-way communication** with the audience to learn how greening could be implemented, and b) use established human behavior change methods to **effectively reach the audience and shift behavior**.

These strategies were put into practice in a number of ways:

- 1) The use of a cross-agency team of employees allowed employees themselves to develop the certification checklist concept and devise its parameters and process. The team included large conferences and small staff meetings in one simple framework that would work for all agencies.
- 2) After the certification was developed, employee focus groups shared their own key motivations to take action. Chief motivations included a love of competition, and an implicit trust of messages that came from fellow employees.
- 3) Drawing from what was learned in the team and focus groups, the **Green & Healthy Awards** was born. The Awards used strategies based on Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) – a framework for behavior change rooted in human behavioral research which involves listening to the target audience. The following key CBSM tools were employed to great effect:

- *Audience Research* – Messaging reflected motivations of potential participants
- *Social Norming* – Agency awards and compelling photos made certification the “norm”
- *Social Diffusion* – Prior certifiers and award winners acted as agency ambassadors
- *Feedback* – Regular emails about agency progress, and the awards themselves, rewarded certifiers.



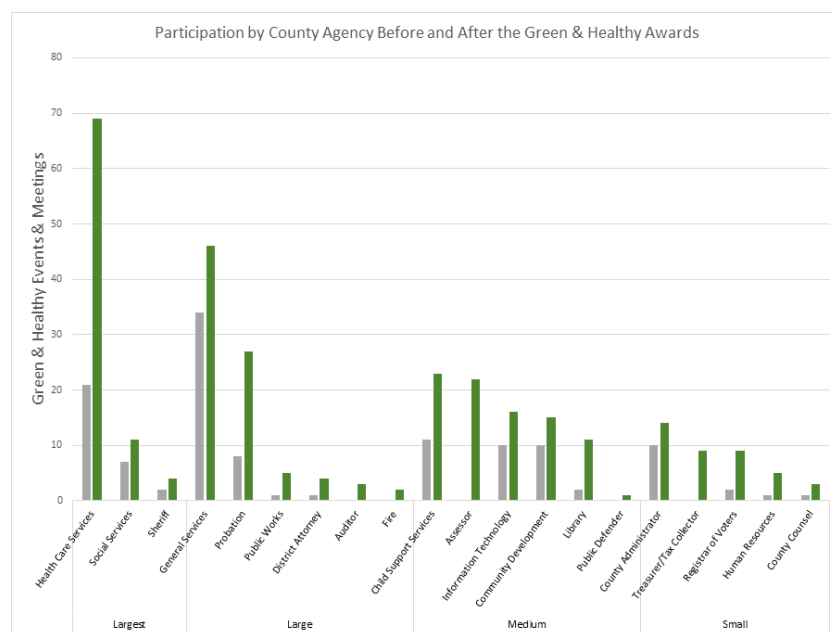
Results

Goals Achieved

The Green & Healthy Awards promotion wildly exceeded its goals. The average rate of certification was ten events per month prior to the campaign, and the goal was set to triple the highest monthly figure to certify 40 events during the contest. Ultimately, 192 events and meetings were certified in only six weeks, with 144 brand-new event planners from all 20 county agencies participating. Through these events, 9,248 event attendees – employees and members of the public – were exposed to green & healthy practices in everyday county operations. The



program's environmental impact calculations show that events certified during the contest conserved over 1,300 gallons of water simply by avoiding the use of paper plates.¹ Just by avoiding the use of bottled water in events during the contest, 4.7 barrels of oil were saved.²



Another result of the outreach was the creation of a contact database of 550 employees in all agencies who plan events and meetings, which helps address the challenge of identifying and reaching the right audience for this program.

¹ Environmental Paper Network Paper Calculator 3.2.1 (coated bleached kraft), <http://c.environmentalpaper.org/home>

² EPA Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator, <https://www.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gas-equivalencies-calculator>



Green & Healthy Events and Meetings Caught Fire!

Employees and agencies all over the County were energized to use virtual meetings, reusable cups and pitchers, reusable or minimal food ware, and waste sorting systems to make their events and meetings greener.

The achievement of this level of participation during promotion also shows the success of the cross-agency team that developed the certification process. Certification was straightforward and meaningful enough to effectively engage employees over time, and support a diversity of greening strategies at events all over the county.

Challenges to Quantifying Impact

Our accounting of environmental impact was a challenge due to lack of marketplace information that would allow us to convert some of the documented purchasing changes into hard environmental impact figures. The calculations above required more research than anticipated. Major manufacturers contacted were unable to share about their process. As a result, the impact of certification has been more robust than we've been able to measure thus far. In the future, national bodies such as SPLC may facilitate information-sharing to enable meaningful translation of program impact to environmental impact.

The “stickiness” or lasting effect of the Awards promotion outreach has been challenging to measure. In an effort to welcome more participation, event planners were allowed to pre-certify events that happened as late as January 31. As expected, few new certification applications were submitted in December and January because events happening then had already been certified during the contest. Because many large events are held in the fall, there will likely be an annual increase, rather than monthly. The program now has a list of some large recurring events and can reach out with reminders to certify.

Changes in Purchasing and Related Practices

The major environmental impact areas of the program have to do with **reducing and**

“greening” purchases, chiefly copy paper, food and beverage, and food service ware, as well as providing opportunities for **reduced and greened business travel**. Sample environmental impact calculations are included in the Results section above.

In addition to the hard metrics developed, anecdotal evidence shows a considerable lasting effect for decentralized purchasing. For example, one department used to print approximately 150 one-page agendas for its monthly staff meetings. As a result of paper reduction efforts associated with the certification program, the agenda is now projected on a screen, and no paper handouts are given. This type of culture shift can spread across a division.

STAFF MEETINGS (W/O FOOD)

Start With These Actions

 If event is longer than 2 hours, provide a 10 minute break.

Don't provide handouts; or if there are handouts, print double-sided on recycled paper. 

Staff's Favorite Eco-Actions:

 No attendees will travel to the event other than their typical work commute.

Decorate without purchasing anything new (rented, reusable or no decorations). 

 Promote the event without using paper flyers.

Click to Certify Now!

CONFERENCES & TRAININGS

Start With These Actions

 If event is longer than 2 hours, provide a 10 minute break.

Don't provide handouts; or if there are handouts, print double-sided on recycled paper. 

Staff's Favorite Eco-Actions

 Locate event within walking distance of BART and provide directions.

Decorate without purchasing anything new (rented, reusable or no decorations). 

Staff's Favorite Food Eco-Actions

 Have an accurate RSVP count to reduce waste.

Serve food buffet-style rather than in bags or boxes. 

 Provide compost bins for disposal of food waste and food-soiled paper.

Click to Certify Now!

Most Common Eco-Actions

Six “Easy Certification Guides” (two pictured) summarized the most common eco-actions chosen for each type of event or meeting, in a fun, accessible format.

Unexpected Results

The most unexpected result was the sheer number of certifications during the Awards contest and number of new participants in the program! Of course this was a rewarding surprise, but it did come with challenges. Simply confirming and approving each certification, and advising new certifiers, towards the close of the contest was time-consuming.

Numbers following the Awards contest are so far inconclusive. In the past it has been observed that event planners do not continue to certify regular events (such as annual town halls), even though they have already shifted practices and simply must fill out the short online form to certify. Anecdotally, the sustainability effect *is* lasting, and changes in habits persist. Therefore, the program continues to have a growing environmental impact, if one that is difficult to measure.

LESSONS LEARNED

Knowing HOW to Communicate is the Key to Decentralized Success

The awards contest was, at heart, about effective communication. The certification program had already been built, but to get uptake, hundreds of geographically dispersed employees had to take notice and take action. Past promotion via passive county-wide email announcements hadn't led to levels of participation that the program had the potential for. To get through a crowded communication field, program staff had to ask employees what would catch their attention and then fit outreach to that mold.

- **Friendly competition:** To add a sense of urgency, excitement and team spirit, competition captured employee attention.
- **People like YOU are doing it:** Using photos of other certifiers, materials all reflected the ease of certification.
- **The messenger matters:** County employees prefer to hear from a colleague rather than a mass email. The first person to certify in each agency was awarded with a "Trendsetter" award, and these winners became the most effective outreach ambassadors.

Benefits

This work resulted in **significant new behavior** and awareness of simple sustainable actions employees can take. Since program launch, over 18,230 event attendees have been exposed to green & healthy practices, through certification of 298 county events and

meetings to date, with 192 in only 6 weeks. Each event took steps to reduce paper handouts; increase purchase of sustainable, healthy food; switch to reusable or compostable food service ware; encourage clean business travel; and/or implement a number of other sustainable steps.

The benefits of the initiative extend beyond its direct results. Certified events help **to shift culture towards sustainable practices**. Leading up to and following the awards contest, employees were overheard in hallways asking, “Did you remember to make the event green?” Employees were heard expressing pride in the sustainability of their agencies – one employee said, “I’m with Probation, we like to do things ‘green and healthy.’” Though greening an event is a small action, it is visible to all attendees, and helped to raise the profile of all sustainability efforts in the county, by demonstrating values and policy in action.

Internal Benefits

- Furthers **implementation of the Climate Action Plan** by shifting employee culture around formerly intractable habits and practices, and proves the model for future engagement initiatives.
- **Raises the profile** of green & healthy practices, and of the Sustainability Program.
- Built an **outreach email list** (currently over 550 “interested” employees), including event certifiers and those who wanted to learn more.
- **Brings employees into sustainability outreach** in their agencies – already, some contest winners have stepped into additional leadership roles, for example in the County’s clean commute program.
- **Supports healthy lifestyles** for employees, through exercise breaks, walking to

Green & Healthy Campaign Metrics

Will show...	By the numbers
Environmental impact of the campaign	# of events & meetings certified (target: triple current rate)
	Eco-actions selected by each event
Lasting cultural impact of certification	# of repeat & unique certifiers
	# of event attendees exposed
	# of agencies participating (target: all agencies)

What the metrics will help us learn:

→ What was the eco-impact of certification

→ What encourages repeat certification

→ What barriers remain for agencies

Metrics that Mattered

This table was shown at the initial Climate Executive meeting to gain approval of the awards contest approach. It shows how progress was measured, and how it would advance larger goals.

meetings, and healthier foods, which could potentially contribute to lower health care costs.

- **Reduces waste** sent to landfill (at cost to organization) and increased composting and recycling.

External Benefits

- **Reduces use** of paper, disposable food service ware, ride-alone driver transportation, bottled water, which avoids GHG emissions from extraction, transport, and manufacture of resources
- **Changes purchasing habits** for food service ware (switched to reusables or compostables), copy paper (to 100% post-consumer content), catering (to certified Green Businesses), food (to healthy, local, and/or organic), which encourages manufacturing sector to produce environmentally preferable products
- **Causes “ripple effect”** sustainable practices – awareness of environmental impact of purchases and practices encourage sustainable use in other business and personal contexts
- Increases physical exercise and stretch breaks at long meetings and events, and increases availability of healthy meal and snack options, both of which contribute to **improved health** for employees and members of the public
- **Increases patronage** of local catering businesses certified as Green Businesses or and Small, Local & Emerging Businesses (SLEB)
- Encourages local catering businesses and other service providers to **offer green and healthy options** to county and other customers

Business Case

Greening events and meetings promotes the efficient use of resources and often reduces purchases. As a result, certifying meetings benefits County agencies facing lean budgets and limited staffing resources.

Though costs and savings are likely to be very different from event to event, the table below shows estimated calculations of *potential* savings associated with eco-actions in the checklist, for a meeting of 100 employees:

Eco-Action	Practical Application	Estimated Potential Savings (100 attendees)
Avoid the use of water bottles	Replace 100 half-liter plastic bottles with compostable cups ³	\$66
Provide a virtual meeting option	10 employees from across the County opt to call in virtually rather than driving to Oakland ⁴	\$300
Provide public transportation option	10 employees from across the County opt to take public transit ⁵	\$190
All food is finger food	Avoid buying 100 plastic forks ⁶	\$5
		TOTAL: \$561

Even if an event planner does not opt for these cost-saving eco-actions, the process of revisiting how events are planned with sustainability in mind can help to reduce overall resource use and tighten efficiencies.

Process

A Strong Foundation

To further Climate Action Plan (CAP) implementation through innovation, the County's Climate Executive Committee selected greening County-sponsored events as one of five cross-agency climate initiatives to be completed in 2014 by employee teams. The team's assignment was to develop guidance that would be effective across the County's twenty diverse agencies. The team, chaired by staff from the County Library and Community Development Agency, included staff from



Cross-Agency Team

The cross-agency climate team brought together representatives from seven agencies: County Administrator, Community Development, Health Care Services, General Services, Library, Sheriff, and Social Services.

³ Rough average bottles and cups in bulk, between 3 brands. Accounts for two large plastic pitchers, \$6.

⁴ \$.54/mi, 6 employees from Dublin (29 mi x 2) and 4 from Fremont (26 mi x 2) = \$300.24. (Technology currently available in all agencies)

⁵ BART ticket (\$8.80) rather than Fremont trip (\$28.08) reimbursement, x 10

⁶ Figure snacks, not meal. Rough average \$4.99 between 3 brands

seven county agencies; the Sustainability Program provided research and administrative support.

Over nine months, the team researched approaches to greening events and meetings. They studied external models and current practices, and met with diverse event planners to determine the most effective way to “green.” Based on event planner input and best practices at area institutions, the team developed and refined a checklist of eco-actions and related resources. The certification process was then piloted with events in several agencies and then the checklist was refined based on feedback from the pilots. Once it was ready for county-wide launch, the team promoted the new program via County-wide emails, a presentation to County department heads, and a training for about 50 agency designees.



Bring the audience in to lead the design process.

The audience for this effort was made up of decentralized event planners all over the County. The decision to engage this audience by having them lead the process through a cross-agency team was a key to success. If the County had simply borrowed a checklist from another institution, it may have been less applicable to the context and more difficult to implement. Engaged employees were also able to ask for honest feedback from their colleagues during pilot testing, which helped to make the program more streamlined and user-friendly.

The certification process was deemed easy and useful by the pilot testers and early adopters, but only about 10 events per month were being certified. **Participation had to be scaled up to maximize benefits.** At the same time, the Executive Committee realized that the CAP implementation focus needed to include broad employee engagement. This would help to capture the full potential environmental benefit of climate action programs. The Green & Healthy certification was the first initiative selected for a county-wide employee engagement campaign because of its measurability, its accessibility to employees at all levels, and its potential to reach large numbers of employees and members of the public as event attendees.

Planning for Promotion

To thoughtfully engage employees, the Sustainability Program built an initiative on the methods of Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM), which are based in human behavior research. CBSM tools rely on a solid understanding of one’s audience. Through focus groups, surveys and interviews, it was determined that Alameda County employees respond well to:

- Competition
- Word of mouth
- Personal benefits (e.g., information on healthy habits)
- “Bite-sized” requests

They are deterred or worried by:

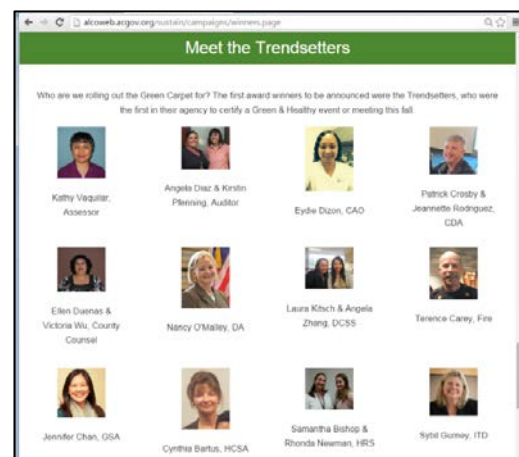
- Taking action without explicit approval
- Actions that take a long time or don’t seem “doable”

Therefore, the initiative became a fun competition focused around a single action of certifying an event. It was promoted through agency heads (to establish high-level support) and through employee word-of-mouth and resource-sharing.

Key innovative strategies were adapted from CBSM approaches. These included:

Social Diffusion – Prior certifiers and award winners acted as agency ambassadors

- Since employees have more relationships built within their agencies than in the county at large, a Trendsetter award was offered for the first to certify in an agency. Trendsetters were then asked to distribute messages within their agencies. Their names and photos were also used in email outreach to show ease of use in every agency.
- Program staff spent a full day visiting Trendsetters and other certifiers with posters, table tents, and reusable pitchers that could be used to spread the word about the contest.
- The contest was designed to incentivize person-to-person outreach. The agency “Green Machine” award was based on number of *certifiers*, not certified events. Motivated employees reported that they actively recruited others to participate and certify in order to win.



Social Norming – Agency awards and compelling photos made certification the “norm”

- Photos of award winners and of green events were solicited by offering a “Shutterbug” award for Best Photo. These photos were then featured prominently in outreach as evidence of enthusiastic participation.

Segmentation and Feedback – Update emails and an awards ceremony rewarded certifiers

- Friendly competition was stoked with emails personalized to each agency. Emails mentioned agency standing, and whether a competitor was overtaking the lead, to encourage more certifications. The day this segmented email went out set the record for most certifications in a single day.



- Additional feedback was provided by celebrating the winning certifiers and agencies at an Awards Ceremony. Winners “walked the green carpet” to accept certificates, and learned from each other about innovative ways to green events.

Measuring and Reporting for Continuous Improvement

Because the Sustainability Program reviews certification applications, raw submission numbers were readily available, as well as records of eco-actions selected. These numbers showed increased submissions, increased number of participants, and calculated environmental impact.

Additionally, the Sustainability Program has begun recording and reporting these numbers to each agency as a part of agency climate action progress reports. These roll up into a climate dashboard which tracks agency and county-wide performance on a number of metrics, including the number of green & healthy events certified. These metrics will also will be reported to the Board of Supervisors.

Financial Information

Cost Savings

Cost savings associated with event greening are decentralized to each event, as represented in the Business Case table above. It is important to note that some of the largest savings are not captured by the event host, because attendee travel is usually not covered by the event. However, these externalized savings still benefit the County when County employees shift their travel from driving alone to greener options. **As County agencies become aligned around sustainability, they can reduce both overall event-related costs and greenhouse gas impact.**

Budget

Program implementation is centralized in the Sustainability Program. Materials costs for the Awards contest are shown below.

Award Promotion	Green & Healthy Awards website, reusable for future campaigns (IT design, hosting, and support)	\$3,000
	Awards promotional materials (50 reusable water pitchers with program logo)	\$855
	Travel within county for presentations and site visits (Electric vehicle and transit)	\$160
	Supplies and in-house printing (Flyers and certificates)	\$75
Award Event	Awards ceremony (Room and technology rental, food and drink)	\$1,200
	Prizes (Mugs with tea and healthy snack bars)	\$285
Total		\$5,575

The budget for this program was considered part of the overall Sustainability Program budget.

Leadership

Organizational Change

Organizational change is a central challenge of institutional sustainability. Behavior change is at the cutting edge of sustainability implementation and is a crucial component of any comprehensive sustainability or sustainable purchasing plan. This certification and promotion initiative serves as a replicable model of successful employee behavior change.

Relevance to SPLC Principles

The Green & Healthy Events & Meetings program and Green & Healthy Awards exemplify the SPLC principles:

Commitment: The program engages executive leaders and individual event planners to do their part toward full implementation of the Climate Action Plan at all levels of the organization.

Understanding: The certification checklist outlines the environmental and health impacts of purchasing choices and provides practical alternatives to decision-makers.

Innovation: Bringing new employee voices into policy implementation has made the program and related outreach effective by tailoring the approach to the County context.

Results: The Awards initiative has resulted in widespread adoption of green and healthy events, resulting environmental, economic, and social benefits.