

How 'bout them apples?

Municipalities adopt healthy vending and food procurement policies to support employees' health goals

MUNICIPAL WORKERS who want to eat healthier need wholesome food choices where they work. Municipalities can create healthier food environments for their residents and government employees through their food procurement policies and practices. The city's or town's "purchasing power" provides an opportunity for local government leaders to adopt purchasing policies and practices that are in line with nutrition standards set by national health organizations.

Municipalities may be purchasing snacks and beverages offered in vending machines on government property, purchasing the meals served in the employee cafeteria or at senior centers, or they may be providing meals or snacks at employee or community meetings – these are all opportunities to provide healthy food options to support those residents and employees who are trying to eat healthfully.

Adopting healthy vending and healthy meeting policies can be feasible, effective, easy-to-implement strategies for busy government staff. The HEAL

Cities and Towns Campaign, a project of the Institute for Public Health Innovation in partnership with the Virginia Municipal League, offers free technical assistance to help municipal leaders adopt healthy eating and active living (HEAL) policies and practices. Funded by Kaiser Permanente, HEAL Cities and Towns provides model healthy vending and healthy meeting policies and practices as well as toolkits to get communities started.

Healthy Vending

Some municipalities provide vending machines in municipal buildings for the convenience of their workers and residents. The vending machines may be located in workplace settings as well as at recreation centers, community centers, and libraries frequented by community residents of all ages. In nego-

tiating the municipality's contract with the vendor, municipal staff can require that a certain percentage of the snacks and beverages offered meet nutritional standards.



An Arlington County Board Member realized that the county's vending machines were lacking healthy snack and beverage options. To change that, the County's Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) implemented a policy in 2010 requiring all beverages and snacks offered countywide to meet specific nutrition standards. The DPR nutrition standards were integrated into the vending contract so that all of the county's 110+ vending sites – including community centers, parks, libraries, employee workplaces and schools – are covered by the vending machine nutrition standards.

Strong sales data, children's testimonials and parent expressions of appreciation are indicators of success. "Whether you are a parent picking up your kid from extended day and need a quick energy boost before soccer practice or an older adult who just completed their workout or a teen hanging out in one of our afterschool programs, we wanted to make the healthy choice the easy choice," said Michele Gregory, Section Leader, Office of Community Health, Arlington County Department of Parks and Recreation.

In 2014, Leesburg's Parks and Recreation Department adopted nutritional guidelines for its parks and recreation vending machines. The Parks and Recreation Department viewed its healthy vending as consistent with its goal of combating childhood obesity. Leesburg, a Silver Level HEAL town, received technical assistance from HEAL through a webinar, fact sheets and in-person meetings.

As with any new initiative, they faced some resistance that they were able to overcome. "The town incorporated a gradual

Put your money where your mouth is

80%

of adults are trying to lose weight or maintain their weight.

2/3

say that the healthfulness of food has a great impact on their food decisions.

Sales ↑

A 2011 analysis reported that sales of healthier snacks are outpacing traditional snack foods and contribute to increased sales growth and profits for food companies.

Source: International Food Information Council Foundation

increase to the percentage of healthy options over a period of time, as opposed to an immediate drastic change,” explained Rich Williams, Director of Parks and Recreation. “This was acceptable to our vendor and they were able to see over a period of time that their bottom line was not being impacted.”

Healthy Meetings

Taking the opportunity to provide healthy food options at employee meetings and trainings and community events sponsored by your city or town is another practical way to help employees and residents eat well and make healthy choices. Model “healthy meeting” policies and toolkits are available to provide guidance on defining healthy food and putting recommendations into practice. For example, the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity provides these general recommendations to follow when providing food at meetings and events:

- Offer recommended servings of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, especially for all-day meetings.
- Place healthier foods and beverages in prominent positions, where they are most likely to be seen and more likely to be chosen.
- Post calories at conferences and meetings when appropriate and/or possible.
- Provide reasonable portions of foods and beverages (i.e., avoid large portions).
- Consider not serving food at breaks that are not meal-times; instead provide physical activity.

Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers healthy meeting recommendations. To limit sweet treats at meetings, the CDC recommends:

- Offering a selection of apples, bananas, pears, and other fruit individually, as a fruit salad, or added in desserts to reduce or replace added sugar.
- Providing frozen 100% juice bars or sorbets instead of high-calorie desserts.
- Offering whole grain and low-sugar baked products.
- Providing low-fat or non-fat yogurt, either plain or with fruit or healthful additions, minimizing added sugar.
- Serving smaller size or “mini” desserts to limit calories..

These and other recommendations and guidance materials can provide language for policies, memoranda, or department procedures. The language and guidance can also be negotiated into contracts with food vendors and be helpful when working with caterers.

Bluefield, a Bronze Level HEAL town, adopted a policy in 2015 stating that the town will provide all employees with access to clean, safe, palatable drinking water free of charge at every facility in the cafeteria and eating areas.

In practice, this requires that all facilities, and also work vehicles, are kept well-stocked with bottled water, water jugs and hydration stations to make drinking water an accessible alternative to soda and sugar-sweetened beverages. “We know that dehydration can cause headaches, tiredness, nausea and difficulty concentrating. It can also lead to long-term health

problems. We wanted to make sure our workforce remains healthy by giving them access to clean and fresh drinking water,” said Billie Roberts, Bluefield Community Development Coordinator.

Warrenton, a Gold Level HEAL town, passed several healthy eating active living policies in 2016, spearheaded by its Parks and Recreation Department. These included a healthy vending policy and healthy meeting policy. It includes directives such as: providing access to water at all work meetings as well as other healthier drink options; making unsweetened fruit or vegetables available whenever food is served at a meeting; ensuring that 50% of foods provided come from the categories of whole grain, low-fat or fat-free dairy products, and lean protein; and that an effort is made to minimize fat, sugar and sodium in the food offerings. The stated goal of the policy is “to improve the health of employees (and guests) by offering healthy alternatives to the traditional donuts and coffee style meetings.”

Margaret Rice, Director of Parks and Recreation in Warrenton says, “Since adopting our HEAL resolution, we have allowed the donuts, but have required that a bowl of fruit also be available right next to the donuts. I am very pleased to say that after about two weeks, we started noticing that the fruit disappeared much faster than the donuts. It is now very common to see all the fruit disappear, but not all the donuts.” 

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Resources on healthy vending and healthy meetings

MORE INFORMATION on healthy vending and healthy meetings can be found on HEAL’s Workplace Wellness page at www.healcitiesmidatlantic.org.

HEAL also collaborates with the American Heart Association on providing assistance to local government leaders regarding healthy vending. For further information about healthy vending, contact AHA’s Regional Campaign Manager Tarah Ranke at Tarah.Ranke@heart.org or 517.896.4527.

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FOR MODEL POLICIES and practices and more information about becoming a HEAL city or town, contact Susan DeFrancesco, HEAL Cities and Towns Campaign Manager, at sdefrancesco@institutephi.org or 240-252-2016. HEAL Cities & Towns is a project of the Institute for Public Health Innovation funded by Kaiser Permanente.

