

CASE STUDY: IMPLEMENTING HEALTHY NUTRITION GUIDELINES FOR VENDING MACHINES IN THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES GOVERNMENT

Background

In 2005, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors took an important step towards improving employee health and the health of its clients by establishing a Blue Ribbon Task Force on Childhood Obesity. This Task Force systematically examined a variety of public policy and public health practice issues related to child and adult obesity, including the need for more uniform institutional food policies that integrate healthy nutrition standards in County-operated or contracted food services.⁴⁻⁷

“The Task Force’s recommendation to establish uniform nutrition standards for food and vending services affected many people broadly,” said Dr. Paul Simon, Director of the Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention in the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. “The County of Los Angeles is a major purchaser of food for vending machines, concessions, cafeterias, snack shops, and other programs that serve or distribute foods.”

The County of Los Angeles government is the single largest employer in the region, comprising 37 departments, with approximately 100,000 employees.⁷ Nearly one-third of these departments contracts and/or operates food services that sell or distribute snacks or meals to thousands of children and adults.

In August 2006, the Board adopted the motion Los Angeles County Food Policy: Vending Machines, Fundraising, and County-Sponsored Meetings. This directive instructed all County programs and agencies that operate vending machines or host public events to comply with specific nutrition standards outlined in the County’s policy. The requirements cover all contracted food and beverage vending machines, and any food or beverages to be purchased by the County in support of meetings or events; compliance with the requirements are voluntary for fundraisers. Although the motion called for a phased-in approach for vending machines, with 25% of products to be in compliance by January 2007, 33% by 2009, and 50% by 2011, this was amended to 100% healthy products requirements in late 2009, reflecting an institutional commitment to providing healthier food choices for employees and visitors of County facilities.

KEY STATISTICS IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

- › There are 9.8 million children and adults living in the region.¹
- › The prevalence of childhood obesity has increased from 18.9% in 1999 to 22.4% in 2011.²
- › The obesity prevalence among adults was 23.6% in 2011, up from 14% in 1997.³

Board Motions on Healthy Food Promotion

Since 2006, the County Food Policy has been reviewed and revised periodically to ensure it meets current dietary science and takes into consideration program implementation factors. Although the original Board motion prohibited all sugar-sweetened beverages, this was revised in February 2009 to match the State of California beverage standards, which were already in place in schools. This change made the standards more consistent across vendors, but allowed electrolyte replacement beverages – also known as sports drinks, which contained no more than 42 grams of added sweetener per 20-ounce serving, to be sold. In August 2009 the motion was amended again, eliminating the phased-in approach and streamlining the requirements to 100% healthy products for all vending machines. Further revisions in late 2010 led to the elimination of electrolyte replacement beverages that exceed 25 calories per 8 ounces and provisions that ensure a bottled water option is made available in every vending machine, that bottled water is priced no higher than other beverages, and that snack products contain less than 360 mg of sodium per individual food item or package if prepackaged. The revised policy also allows sugar-sweetened or artificially sweetened beverages with less than 25 calories per 8 ounces.

In March 2011, the County Board of Supervisors took further steps to improve the agency’s food environments by adopting a more substantive motion that allows Public Health to review and comment on all Requests for Proposals (RFP) for new or renewing food service and vending contracts from County departments that procure, sell, distribute, or serve food to the public. The motion offered Public Health the unprecedented opportunity to integrate contract language and provisions for departments to comply with a number of nutrient limits and food procurement practices, including “100% healthy” vending machine nutrition guidelines.

Lessons Learned

During the initial implementation of the original County vending requirements, numerous lessons emerged. Because contract duration can be lengthy and complex, making modifications to existing agreements were not immediately feasible and often required voluntary cooperation by the vendors. During the initial stages of implementation, several vendors had to modify products in their vending machines on a voluntary basis. Under the phase-in plan, the percentage guidelines for healthy items (e.g., 25%, 33%, and 50%) were difficult to follow and led to poor compliance with these standards and to inconsistent placement of products. Without proper product placement, even the introduction of signage like the “Smart Snackers” stickers provided inadequate triggers for customers to select healthy food products. Eventually, these and other operational lessons led to an amendment to the County motion, requiring “100% healthy” vending food products in all eligible vending machines. Initially, these changes were met with some

resistance, but with time, implementation became smoother throughout the food procurement and food service contracting process.

Useful Approaches to Implementing Vending Machine Nutrition Guidelines

- › Assess institutional awareness and readiness to implement healthy nutrition standards.
- › When developing nutrition standards, specify what foods are allowed, the institutions impacted, and the timeline for implementation.
- › Outline an implementation plan that addresses sustainability (e.g., how to troubleshoot short-term as well as long-term barriers, how much technical assistance will be needed and provided, how should compliance be monitored, etc.).
- › Spend time early in the process on outreach, education, and relationship building with stakeholders and end users of vending machine nutrition standards.
- › Develop a toolkit or implementation guide which includes educational materials tailored to the target institutions.
- › Start with small, achievable objectives (“quick wins”) and build momentum gradually over time to have public opinion work with, rather than against, the changes.
- › Plan accordingly with proper staffing and other resources to assist with implementation and maintenance of the nutrition standards and food procurement practices over time.

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