



WELLNESS

‘Health Is Wealth’

Cities invest in healthy items for vending machines

by Joy Dickinson, Florida League of Cities

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CITY OF ST. PETERSBURG

Vending machines in city worksites and on city-owned properties traditionally have offered drinks and snacks with high calories, added sugar and high levels of sodium. However, cities are beginning to establish vending and procedure policies that are based on sound nutritional standards from national organizations.

“Workplaces are continuously looking for ways to create an environment where making the healthy choice is the easy choice,” said **Gwen Mahabir**, MS, CHES, **Hometown Health manager** at the **Florida League of Cities**. Vending machines may be overlooked, but they shouldn’t be, Mahabir said.

“Snack choices at work can directly affect an employee’s energy levels, how they feel and their overall health,” she said. “Over time this can make either a positive or negative impact on productivity/job performance.” A healthier workforce also can help reduce illness-related absenteeism.

Offering healthy food options at city workplaces also can help battle obesity. In turn, healthier employees can translate into lower healthcare spending. Healthcare spending for obese adults is 56 percent higher than for adults who have a normal weight, according to the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services.

As part of an overall emphasis on healthier lifestyles for its employees, the **City of Doral** requires healthy options at city vending machines and concessions. The requirement came when **Mayor Juan Carlos Bermudez** brought that resolution to City Council as part of a “Get Fit Doral” program. The city manager was made responsible for working with a licensed nutritionist. The food and beverages sold in city vending machines must meet specific national requirements.

Bermudez points to obesity as one of the primary motivators for the effort. A survey of Floridians indicated that more than 64 percent are overweight or obese,

according to the Florida Department of Health. “There is no doubt that this is a prevalent issue in the community, and anything that can be done to lower these obesity numbers should be done, especially as it’s so detrimental to our youth,” Bermudez said. “The benefit of having healthier vending machines will, hopefully, be a community that is making better eating decisions for a better life.”

Having a healthier community was a primary motivator for the **City of St. Petersburg**.

“Creating a culture of health and positively impacting the social determinates of health is really a requirement for achieving our city’s vision,” said **Deputy Mayor Kanika Tomalin**. A Healthy St. Pete initiative was created in 2016 that aims to improve the community’s overall health. “So this aligned perfectly with our goal to create healthy eating options for this overall program,” Tomalin said.

St. Petersburg has adopted a policy that all food and beverage machines on city-owned property must comply with federal guidelines and ones from the American Health Association for healthy vending choices. Calories are listed for items so that employees and residents can make informed decisions.

The city began the effort with pilot programs for youth at recreation centers. It had a control group in which youth could choose healthy or traditional snacks. “Over time, with exposure and ready access, the healthy items were at least equally in demand, sometimes more,” Tomalin said.

Doral also reports a positive response to its changes. “City employees really enjoy the fact that they can grab a quick snack at any time without having to compromise their commitment to making healthier decisions,” Bermudez said. “There is also an employee weight loss challenge everyone is excited about, and the ‘Fit Picks’ in the vending machines are certainly helping them stay on track in the competition.”

Emerald Coast Utilities Authority, which has group health coverage through the **Florida Municipal Insurance Trust**, has effectively built a culture of health that includes the promotion of healthy choices in vending machines. “Employees regularly share their positive feedback and appreciation for having these healthy options easily accessible with their Human Resources Department,” Mahabir said.

TIPS FROM CITIES WITH EXPERIENCE

Simply asking your current vendor options to remove items that are high in sugar, fat and sodium can make a positive impact on an employer’s bottom line, Mahabir said.

“Request from your vendors that they replace these unhealthy items with nutrient-dense snack options instead,” she said. “Ideally, it would be best to only utilize vendors that feature healthy, all-natural snacks and drinks.”

The price of the healthy items can be a key factor in acceptance. Healthy items may be pricier due to a shorter shelf life than less healthy options that have higher levels of preservatives. Set prices for healthier items that aren’t

Doral Vending Machine Requirements

VENDING MACHINES CONTAIN AT LEAST 50 PERCENT OF FOODS THAT MEET THE FOLLOWING REQUIREMENTS:

- » Not more than 35 percent of its total calories from fat.
- » Not more than 10 percent of its total calories from saturated fat.
- » Not more than 35 percent of its total weight composed of sugar, including naturally occurring and added sugar.
- » Not more than 175 calories per individual food item.

AT LEAST 50 PERCENT OF BEVERAGES MUST BE FROM THE FOLLOWING LIST:

- » Fruit-based drinks that are composed of no less than 50 percent fruit juice and that have no added sweeteners
- » Drinking water
- » Milk
- » Electrolyte replacement beverages that do not contain more than 42 grams of added sweetener per 20-ounce serving

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much higher so that patrons aren’t discouraged from seeking those options, Bermudez advised. In Doral, the price for healthy foods and beverages can’t exceed the price of non-healthy foods by more than 10 percent. “The truth is that eating and living healthier is an investment, but it’s important for the community to understand that it’s a worthwhile investment,” he said. “Health is wealth.”

Also, consider whether the city should offer 100 percent healthy items. One Florida city took that approach but reported poor sales due to the prices of the items. Doral leaders said that at least 50 percent of the foods in vending machines must meet specific nutritional requirements. (See above.)

Before making any changes, do your research. St. Petersburg leaders spent time looking at cities that had similar goals, setting up focus groups and developing policy. “We tried to be diligent in talking to stakeholders and creating a sustainable policy that would move the needle and impact change,” Tomalin said.

The policy piece is important. “By making it a procurement administrative policy, compliance is built into the contract with the vendor,” Tomalin said. “Because we implemented standards, as opposed to a prescribed detail listing of specific snacks that are prohibited or not, it gives vendors latitude by which they meet these standards.”

Don’t be shy about taking steps toward a healthy vending program. You can always modify the program as you progress, Tomalin said.

The efforts to make your community and workforce healthier and fitter are ambitious but necessary, Bermudez said.

Joy Dickinson is an assistant editor at the Florida League of Cities. For more information about the health initiatives offered through the Florida Municipal Insurance Trust group health insurance program, contact Gwen Mahabir, Hometown Health manager for the Florida League of Cities, at gmahabir@flcities.com or (407) 367-4006. **QC**

Resources

Healthy Vending Toolkit from the City of Houston. Go to gohealthyhouston.org and select “Go Snacks Program.”

Key Components of Food Procedure & Vending Policies (2015). Go to publichealthlawcenter.org and search for “healthy vending procurement.”

Making Change: Healthier Vending for Municipalities – Guide and Model Vending Agreement. Changelabsolutions.org/publications/making-change-healthier-vending-municipalities.

National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity *Model Beverage and Food Vending Machine Standards*. Cspinet.org/resource/nana-model-beverage-and-food-vending-machine-standards.

American Heart Association *Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit Standards*. Heart.org.