Workplace wellness can play a significant role in healthy living. Worksite initiatives have been shown to have a positive effect on an employee’s body weight, which can help reduce risk factors that lead to obesity and other chronic illnesses. The American Heart Association is helping to connect local government and business leaders who share similar goals of improving workplace wellness. Healthier employees often lead to improved productivity, lower absenteeism and fewer medical care costs related to obesity-related problems. The American Heart Association recently joined wellness leaders and decision makers from 14 municipalities in North Texas for a first-of-its kind roundtable discussion to share ideas and exchange best practices for improving wellness at worksites.

The Challenge
Two out of three people living in Texas are either overweight or obese. Unhealthy diets contribute to the problem: The American Heart Association recommends 4-5 vegetable servings a day, but the median intake in Texas is 1.6 servings. Obesity puts a person at higher risk for health problems, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and diabetes. Improving diets through more nutritious food choices, especially at work, can help fight obesity. The average American spends nearly nine hours at work every day. Employers can help influence eating behaviors by providing a wider option of healthier food choices at their work sites.

“Direct collaboration in regards to wellness brings like-minded individuals together in an effort to develop unique programming, promote change, and make a vast impact on community health and well-being.”  – Ashley Land, Human Resources Manager, City of Grand Prairie
The Solution
Wellness coordinators for the cities of Plano and Garland wanted to learn about campaigns underway by their counterparts in neighboring communities. The cities collaborated with the American Heart Association to bring together leaders from 14 local governments to discuss strategies for building a healthier work environment on all government property, including city buildings, libraries and parks and recreation centers. The North Texas Wellness Roundtable held its inaugural meeting on June 7, 2016, to exchange ideas and share best practices. Participants discussed workplace wellness plans, cafeteria redesigns and initiatives that can encourage heart-smart living, such as healthy vending policies. The American Heart Association presented its Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit, pointing out various examples of how it can improve food environments in all types of worksites.

Sustaining Success
Roundtable participants expressed tremendous interest in meeting on a quarterly basis to continue exchanging knowledge and sharing ideas on how to effectively improve workplace wellness. The American Heart Association team gathered the suggestions, contact information and links to resources recommended during the inaugural meeting into an implementation guide that has been shared with all attendees; staff continue to collaborate with cities that request training on how to make healthier food and drink choices at work and other public places.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The conversation and actions that emerged from the North Texas Wellness Roundtable represent a systemic change within each of the 14 cities and municipalities represented. The coalition may also eventually serve as a platform to help launch policies already being eyed by local government leaders. For example, several have expressed interest in pursuing a healthy vending policy as well as other similar strategies that can make subtle improvements in the health of their employees.

Results
Influential leaders and decision makers from 14 cities, representing 1.6 million residents, met to hold the inaugural North Texas Wellness Roundtable discussion. This networking opportunity provided a space to exchange ideas, tools and resources related to workplace wellness programs currently in place, or ones that could easily be implemented. Participants learned how to become recognized by the American Heart Association as a “Fit Friendly Worksite.” They also were treated to a taste test of snacks and other foods deemed healthy by American Heart Association and federal government standards. “I really feel like this is necessary as cities look for more ways to engage their employees in health,” one participant said.

While improving access to nutritious and affordable food doesn’t guarantee a reduction in diet-related health illnesses, removing barriers to them can help empower people trying to maintain healthy weight.

Get Involved
Ask your local city leaders about what health and wellness initiatives they have in place or that you can help support. Healthy workplaces mean healthier employees and communities. For more information about the North Texas Wellness Roundtable, contact American Heart Association Regional Campaign Manager, Jenny.Cao@heart.org.