Healthy eating isn’t always the easiest choice – especially during busy working lunch meetings when attendees are a captive audience and options are limited. At the hustle and bustle of North Dakota’s state capitol employees and visitors weren’t finding healthy food and beverage options, so a coalition of partners worked together to do something about it. They collaborated with the staff at the Capitol Café to use the guidelines in the American Heart Association Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit, to make lunch more appealing, healthy and affordable. The group helped create an assortment of new healthy box lunch options and an easy order form. The next goal will be to work on state-level vending and cafeteria services.

The Challenge
Cardiovascular diseases, including heart disease and stroke, are the leading causes of death in the United States, and obesity and high blood pressure are major risk factors. In North Dakota, 32 percent of adults are obese, and over 145,000 people are being monitored or treated for high blood pressure. Government agencies can be part of the solution by investing in workplace wellness programs and activities to curb obesity and lower blood pressures, including offering healthier food and beverage choices. But meeting planners don’t always have the expertise or resources to make that happen. Healthy choices are not always seen as appetizing or easy. For example, “healthy” lunches of turkey slices on dry wheat bread, a few raw vegetables and an apple were served recently at a meeting of health groups at the state capitol. Attendees left dissatisfied and hungry, but it sparked a conversation that grew into action.

“The healthy box lunches are just what’s needed for meeting catering. They look good, taste good and come at an affordable cost.”

- Karen K. Ehrens, RD, LRD, Healthy North Dakota Coordinator
The Solution
To provide healthier and tastier food and beverage choices for meetings at the capitol, the American Heart Association began working in collaboration with the Capitol Café manager. With the help of a coalition of health partners, they introduced the American Heart Association’s “Healthy Food and Beverage Toolkit,” which offers specific guidance and nutrition standards for beverages, snacks and meals, and includes helpful resources and links.

With technical assistance and guidance, the coalition developed three healthy box lunch options – using creative ingredients already in stock - that focus on lowering sodium, using whole grains, and increasing fruits and vegetable servings. The box lunches and sides were served to a meeting of public health professionals working on the issue of high blood pressure in North Dakota.

The group’s positive feedback was encouraging, and their suggestions for improvement were incorporated into the box lunch offerings, including the addition of two vegetarian options. The coalition then developed a flyer and promotion to spread the news, and the Capitol Café manager is now working to increase sales by expanding in-house catering. The whole process of product development also became a learning opportunity that can be applied to the Café’s daily menu offerings at the North Dakota state capitol.

Sustaining Success
The Capitol Café manager has expanded the use of the healthy box lunches to the regular menu for the Capitol Café. He has committed to expanding the healthy box lunch and in-house catering menu in the fall of 2015 to offer additional fall and winter offerings.

The ultimate goal is to reduce obesity and chronic disease by increasing healthy food and beverage options in expanded venues throughout the capitol – including vending and Café service – and to help build momentum for widespread adoption of “Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines” across the state.

Results
The public response to the healthy box lunches has been positive. In a survey, the box lunches received scores of five out of five for presentation, food quality, and taste. Additionally, 100% of respondents said they were ‘very likely’ to recommend and/or utilize the healthy box lunches at the Capitol Café. This is a first step in expanding healthy food and beverage options on the North Dakota Capitol grounds that include six buildings and 1,780 employees and an estimated 400 visitors per day.

Get Involved
Having nutritious and tasty food and beverages at meetings makes healthy eating an easy choice. Use the American Heart Association Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit to provide the resources needed to work with an in-house foodservice or local vendor to plan healthy food and beverage service for your next meeting. www.heart.org/workplacewellness