Healthier vending machine initiatives increase consumer choice by expanding access to healthier snack and drink options. In government facilities, the benefits reach state employees and residents who visit public buildings. In West Virginia, previous attempts to work with state agencies to create a healthy vending policy hit roadblocks. But now a coalition is making progress toward providing healthier choices for state employees and the public – and spreading the word about the benefits.

The Challenge
West Virginia has the second highest obesity rate in the nation, with 35.7 percent of adults considered obese. Communities can be places that help residents eat well, be active, and maintain overall physical and mental well-being. That should include the people who work and visit public buildings. The effort to create a healthy vending machine policy in West Virginia began in 2008 when the Peoples Employee Insurance Agency met with the state Department of Rehabilitation Services, which works specifically with blind vendors, to discuss what such a policy could look like. Unfortunately, those early talks were not successful.

The issue is a matter of health equity, not just convenience, for employees who work irregular hours. Often vending machines may be the only source of food or drinks during their work hours. Government entities with healthy vending not only improve healthy food and beverage options for employees and visitors, but also become part of a greater movement to improve the food landscape. A healthy vending initiative also means there are workplace champions in Charleston and surrounding areas who have chosen to try to better the lives of employees and the general public.

“\nI know personally that trying to eat right is difficult to do. So having a vending machine with healthier selections was important to me.”

- Harold Cooper, general manager of WCHS/WVAH-TV
The Solution
A coalition – including the American Heart Association, the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services, the Peoples Employee Health Insurance and the West Virginia Department of Rehabilitation Services – is now back working to create a healthy vending machine policy for all government buildings that includes vendors’ interests.

Sustainability Efforts
The coalition’s work has begun to sprout new opportunities for collaboration. The group is working with University of Charleston nursing students to do a pre-inventory of the vending machines. The coalition also worked with the Marshall University Public Health and the Kanawha County Health Department to create a survey for public employees of the Department of Health and Human Resources and the Public Employees Insurance Agency. Through that work, the coalition learned the Department of Health and Human Resources and the Department of Rehabilitation Services already were collaborating on a healthy vending initiative. The Department of Rehabilitation Services and the coalition are now joining forces on the survey. Both are looking forward to the feedback from the survey results and working together to create a policy that will meet the needs of both the employees and the machine vendors.

The Healthy Living Coalition will build on the lessons learned from the Tulsa Health Department and the efforts undertaken within Oklahoma City to adopt a similar approach in implementing healthy vending options within large businesses and other organizations.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
While offering healthier snack options in vending machines may not stop all employees from making unhealthy food choices, it increases access to healthier snack, beverage or meal options and promotes a wider culture of health.

Results
When the coalition initiated their planning for the healthy vending initiative, it learned the Charleston Area Alliance, a local economic development group, was working with a healthy vending machine entrepreneur as part of their small business incubator program, and that WCHS-TV, the local ABC affiliate, was one of five sites that installed one of the vending machines. The coalition partners pitched a story to the television station about the healthy vending initiative and the state employee survey as a way to promote the initiative. The story aired during a “Healthy for Life” segment during the nightly newscast on July 7, 2015.

Get Involved
The American Heart Association Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit is just one of many resources available to companies and organizations to improve food environments and promote a culture of health. It provides practical action steps and suggestions that are easy to understand and apply. The toolkit has a section specifically on vending machines that can help companies develop their own healthy food and beverage vending initiative.

Companies interested in learning about the toolkit or how to draft their own healthy vending policy can contact the American Heart Association’s West Virginia office.