Obesity puts a person at higher risk for health problems, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and diabetes. An important way to combat obesity is to improve diet by making healthier food choices, especially at work. As Americans spend longer hours at the office, they often grab lunch or snacks from vending machines. Adopting healthy vending policies will help provide employees with nutritious options that can impact their weight and well-being. The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is supporting healthier living in communities around the country, including Oklahoma City. The ANCHOR Leadership Team in OKC, as part of the “Healthy Living Coalition,” is currently working to help implement a healthy vending machine policy on all city property.

The Challenge
In Oklahoma, 33 percent of adults are considered obese, 37.5 percent have high blood pressure and 12 percent have diabetes. Opportunities to reverse these trends exist at work. A 2014 Gallup poll reported that the average employee spends about 47 hours a week on the job. Employers who provide healthy food options at work can positively affect the eating behaviors of their employees, and even help them lose weight, in turn lowering direct costs associated with health insurance premiums and workers’ compensation claims due to obesity-related problems. It also can help decrease employee absenteeism and improve productivity.

“I would use the vending machine more often if healthy, delicious items like these were stocked.”
- City of Oklahoma City employee
The Solution

Many employees opt to work through lunch, or replace meals with snack foods and beverages from workplace vending machines. By adopting a healthy vending policy, businesses demonstrate a commitment to improving their work environment. The Healthy Living Coalition, led by the Voices for Healthy Kids and the ANCHOR Leadership Team, is helping the City of Oklahoma City implement such an effort. On January 22, 2016, the coalition met with city leaders to explain the benefits of a healthy vending policy, which includes stocking machines with a 25 percent minimum of healthy food options. Such items range from fruit cups to baked chips, protein bars and various other foods meeting nutrition guidelines suggested by the American Heart Association and the Government Services Administration. Using the American Heart Association Healthy Food and Beverage Toolkit as a guide, attendees learned about strategic pricing and product placement measures to help successfully implement healthy vending efforts. The coalition also set up a taste test of healthy snacks and beverages that meet suggested nutrition guidelines and could be used to stock vending machines and meet the 25 percent minimum.

Sustaining Efforts

The Healthy Living Coalition will continue to be a resource to Oklahoma City staff to help them implement healthy vending policies on city property. The coalition will schedule follow-up meetings with key officials and plan additional advocacy activities, like hosting sodium or sugary beverage “awareness challenges” to generate awareness about specific nutrition guidelines. The coalition will provide an extensive list of healthy food items that city officials can suggest to food vendors stocking their machines. In addition, the Tulsa Health Department, which has been a champion of healthy vending policies, has agreed to provide Oklahoma City with any support necessary during its implementation period.

Policy, System and Environmental Change

The Healthy Living Coalition’s work with Oklahoma City to implement a healthy vending policy is creating an environmental shift inside city buildings, leading to improved behaviors around food that, in turn, can impact community health.

Results

The result of the healthy vending training and taste test was very positive. All attendees enjoyed the items they sampled and expressed interest in having healthy items stocked in their departments’ vending machines. In addition, they said they would use the machines more frequently if they were stocked with healthy snack and beverage options like the ones they sampled. The healthy vending training and taste test, along with other outreach and support activities, are building the foundation for an official healthy vending policy. If the Oklahoma City Council adopts such a policy on city property, it has the potential to affect 2,250 city employees, as well as hundreds of thousands of guests who visit city-owned properties for varying events. The Healthy Living Coalition has a great opportunity to improve the overall health of Oklahoma City employees and residents with the successful adoption of this policy.

Get Involved

If you are interested in supporting healthy options in vending machines, there are a variety of ways to advocate for change. Start by attending a Healthy Living Coalition meeting. The coalition convenes once a month at the Oklahoma City American Heart Association office. Please email Breanna Russell at Breanna.Russell@heart.org for more information. You may also sign up to be a leader and take action on PreventObesity.net.