Healthier vending machine initiatives increase consumer choice by expanding access to healthier snack and drink options. When they are implemented in government facilities, the initiatives benefit state employees, as well as visitors to state agency buildings. West Virginia has the second highest adult obesity rate in the nation, which puts individuals at higher risk for additional health problems, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Healthy vending policies can help consumers who are trying to improve their diet through more nutritious food choices. Although a previous attempt to work with state vendors to create a health vending policy failed, a new effort holds promise for all involved – consumers, health stakeholders and vendors who had feared that a healthier policy would result in lower profits.

The Challenge
West Virginia has the second highest adult obesity rate in the nation, and has the highest rates of diabetes and high blood pressure in the country. Healthy vending initiatives can help chip away at this problem by providing healthier food options for West Virginians who work inside and visit government buildings. They also represent a health equity issue for employees who work irregular hours and rely on vending machines as a primary source of food and drink during work.

The effort to create a healthy vending machine policy in West Virginia began in 2008. The Public Employee Insurance Agency, the company that provides health and life coverage for all state employees, met to discuss a healthy vending policy with the state’s Department of Rehabilitation Services, which oversees a group of blind vendors who own and operate all the machines on state property. Those early talks ultimately failed because of vendor concerns over the marketability of healthy snacks and potential profit losses.

“Lead by example. Eat better. When organization leaders support and model healthy eating, it makes a powerful statement.”

- American Heart Association, Healthy Community Food and Beverage Tool Kit
The Solution

Eight years after initial negotiations stalled, the American Heart Association helped revive talks to implement a healthy vending machine policy at all state government facilities. It worked with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services and the Public Employee Insurance Agency to renew talks with a receptive Department of Rehabilitation Services. The local American Heart Association team suggested conducting an inventory of vending machine contents to determine what might already qualify as a “healthy” snack. It also recommended surveying employees about their interest in having healthier snack options, and hosting a series of taste tests involving foods that machines could stock. Data gleaned from these efforts could demonstrate support for healthy vending options. It also could help vendors identify specific products that consumers would want, alleviating fears that healthier options would fail to sell.

Sustaining Success

The American Heart Association will continue to work with the Department of Rehabilitation Services and its group of vendors to find ways to promote a healthy policy, one that won’t cut into profit margins for vendors. Additionally, the Association will provide pertinent data about the nutritional information of various food items that will allow vendors to keep their customers informed when making purchasing choices.

Policy, System and Environmental Change

Healthy vending initiatives create environmental change. While offering more nutritious snacks in vending machines won’t stop employees from making unhealthy food choices, it will help those who are determined to eat healthier by providing them with wider options.

Results

The state’s vendors are now aware of the fact that state employees are generally becoming more conscious about their health and the choices they make when it comes to picking snacks and drinks from workplace vending machines. This has prompted them to re-evaluate the types of foods currently being stocked. Vendors also have become interested in learning more about the American Heart Association and healthy nutritional guidelines. Ongoing discussions between the American Heart Association, health agencies and the state vendors are centered on balancing healthy guideline recommendations with vending items that will sell well in machines.

The American Heart Association also helped reach an agreement to work with vendors on a three-month pilot program in West Virginia’s Kanawha County. Under the program, vending machines within a specific area will have an entire shelf devoted to healthier items, which will make up about 30 percent of all the options available. The American Heart Association looks forward to the outcomes of the pilot project, the results of which could potentially shape future negotiations with vendors as they strive to establish a healthy vending machine policy amenable to everyone involved.

Get Involved

The American Heart Association wants to provide businesses, organizations, and individuals with data and resources to help them make educated snack choices. For more information about healthy vending policy, contact Claire Butler at Claire.butler@heart.org.