Obesity has become one of the biggest health threats to the people living in the Mississippi Delta, which has the unwanted distinction of having the highest obesity rates for adults and children in the state. Under the guidance of the American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program, government and community leaders in the Delta’s Desoto County have formed a task force to address obesity’s impact on the health and economy of its employees and residents. The group is considering ways to tackle the problem and encourage community members to make healthier, more nutritious choices during meal and snack times. The task force has chosen to make workplace changes the focus of its first goal. It already has begun exploring a healthy vending policy that would give more nutritious food options to employees who work in county offices and the thousands of people who visit those facilities each week.

The Challenge
The adult obesity rate in Mississippi ranks third in the nation. Within the state, the highest obesity rates for both adults and children are found in the Mississippi Delta, home to Desoto County. Poor nutrition is a top contributing factor for obesity, as well as diabetes, stroke and heart disease. These and other related health problems can take a toll on a community’s economy by contributing to higher medical costs. It also can reduce workforce productivity because chronic illnesses frequently lead to increased absenteeism.

“We are proud to be a part of this national initiative and look forward to helping the American Heart Association promote healthy lifestyles in our community.”
– Hernando Mayor Chip Johnson
The Solution
A newly established ANCHOR task force has helped revive the previously dormant Desoto County Community Health Council, renewing the body’s mission of promoting healthy lifestyles and habits. At the inaugural task force meeting in July 2016, the American Heart Association collaborated with the Council to convene civic and business leaders eager to improve the physical health of people living and working in the five cities that make up the majority of Desoto County: Hernando, Horn Lake, Olive Branch, Southaven and Walls. Task force members agreed to explore the steps necessary to implement an initiative to improve the nutritional content of food sold in vending machines located in all county buildings. Healthy vending policies help consumers who want to improve their diets by providing them with more nutritious snack and drink options. Having a healthy vending policy for Desoto County would benefit both employees who work in the 116 county-owned buildings, as well as people visiting them.

Sustaining Success
The ANCHOR task force will continue meeting to discuss, among other topics, how best to emulate successful healthy living campaigns employed by some of its members. Baptist Memorial Hospital-Desoto, for example, implemented its own healthy vending strategy several years ago. Hospital leaders are now sharing their best practices with task force members, as well as seeking guidance from the American Heart Association on changes it can make to update its own vending policy.

The ANCHOR team also will provide training and materials from the American Heart Association’s Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit. It also plans to organize a taste test to demonstrate to the public examples of flavorsome food options that can be included as part of a healthy vending policy. With an eye on implementing key components of its strategy by the end of 2017, the task force will continue to recruit additional municipal and business partners who can help it reach that goal.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Once successfully implemented, the healthy vending initiative being pursued by members of the ANCHOR task force would represent both policy and environmental changes, ones that will have an impact on county employees and community visitors alike.

Results
The American Heart Association’s ANCHOR team helped reboot the efforts of the Desoto County Community Health Council, which had been inactive for more than a year. Under the Council’s leadership and with its collaboration, the ANCHOR task force began exploring ways to make health-conscience improvements for the 171,000 residents living in Desoto County. Task force members have agreed to pursue an initiative that will increase the choices of healthier items sold in vending machines located in all county buildings, to help consumers make more nutritious food choices when away from home. The task force also continues to reach out to local organizations and coalitions that share its vision for improving the community’s physical health.

Get Involved
Reach out to your city or town leaders to learn more about efforts to improve community wellness for employees and residents. For more information about the task force, contact the ANCHOR Partnerships Program regional campaign manager: Twanda.Wadlington@heart.org.