The obesity rate in North Dakota has more than doubled over a recent two-decade span. An increase in the consumption of soda, other sugary drinks, and unhealthy foods has been a contributing factor in the state’s climbing rate of obesity, a major aspect in the development of diabetes, heart disease and other chronic illnesses. Essentia Health-Fargo, a hospital and clinical facility located in the most populous region of North Dakota, recently gave its cafeteria a major overhaul. It took advantage of the renovation to create a new space with a culture that promotes healthy living and obesity prevention. Water and beverages low in sugar have replaced regular sodas, while nutritious food options are more plentiful and attractively displayed.

The Challenge
The adult obesity rate in North Dakota is 31 percent, which places the state in the top third in the nation for that category. Following a nutritious diet and maintaining a healthy weight can decrease a person’s chances of getting heart disease, diabetes and other chronic illnesses associated with obesity. But persuading people to adopt healthier eating habits is difficult when less than one-quarter of the state’s adults eat the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Essentia Health-Fargo is located in Cass County, where 63.6 percent of adults are either obese or overweight. The facility is among those collaborating with the American Heart Association to create a culture of good health by replacing unhealthy food and drinks in hospital cafeterias with healthier options.

“Healthy choices are incorporated into our setting to reflect and promote healthy lifestyle choices for our patients, guests and employees. Our mission is that we are called to make a healthy difference in people’s lives.”

– Karla Lund, LRD, clinical nutrition manager, Essentia Health
The Solution
As Essentia Health-Fargo’s cafeteria underwent a complete renovation, the hospital’s nutrition and foodservice directors met with a team from the American Heart Association to ensure that a healthy food environment would emerge from the construction. They discussed ways to incorporate recommendations from American Heart Association’s Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit. They also collaborated with Sodexo, the hospital’s food service provider, to ensure it could deliver the more nutritious and heart-healthy food and drinks the hospital wanted to feature. The result is a brighter, spacious and more attractive cafeteria that offers a wider selection of healthy and affordable food for both Essentia Health-Fargo employees and visitors. Nutrition labels are available for nearly every product sold, and a variety of flavored water, ice teas and other beverages low in calories are offered instead of regular soda and other drinks with high amounts of added sugar.

Sustaining Success
Baskets of fruit and a salad bar offering a wide variety of produce and lean proteins are among the first stations that greet cafeteria customers when they walk through the entrance. Nutritious snacks are placed at eye level and ‘grab and go’ items are constantly stocked with lean meat sandwiches, prepared salads with low-fat dressings, and other nutritious options. Key placement of healthy foods will remain a priority, one managed and monitored by the cafeteria’s retail manager. Essentia Health-Fargo also remains committed to making the healthy choice an affordable one. For example, fruit is less expensive than cookies, and milk costs less than sugary sports drinks.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
With support from the American Heart Association, Essentia Health-Fargo made a policy change when it decided to stop selling regular soda and other drinks high in sugar in its newly renovated cafeteria. Additionally, it made an environmental change by placing healthy and nutritious foods at eye level to help encourage sales, and ensuring that signs and banners promoting the cafeteria only feature images of healthy items and daily specials.

Results
When Essentia Health-Fargo began work on renovating its cafeteria, the facility committed itself to creating a brighter space with a more inviting appearance. More than 550 transactions are made every day in the hospital’s revamped cafeteria, which has seen a 20 percent increase in revenues compared to the previous year. Consumers are making healthier food and drink choices thanks to a wider variety of nutritious options and the elimination of high-calorie beverages loaded with sugar. Hospital employees and guests visiting patients, physicians and administrators have plenty of fruits and vegetables, heart-healthy entries and low-fat snacks to choose from.

Get Involved
Businesses interested in promoting a healthier workplace culture are encouraged to check out the American Heart Association’s Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit to learn about ways they can expand healthy food and beverage options. They may also call the American Heart Association’s North Dakota office at 800-437-9710 or go to its website: www.heart.org/NorthDakota.