In Montgomery County, vending machines are required by contract to be stocked with healthier snack and beverage options; however, a recent survey of vending machines options demonstrated more than 60 percent of the machines were instead carrying mostly unhealthy items. As a result, county leaders desired a policy that would require at least 50 percent of all vending machines meet the American Heart Association’s healthy food and beverage nutrition guidelines. The proposal would affect vending machines in public spaces such as courthouses, libraries and all other county property. The proposal has broad community support thanks to the efforts of Sugar Free Kids Maryland, a statewide coalition of which the American Heart Association is a founding partner. This effort would go a long way to improving the food and beverage environment for county employees and all visitors on government property. The approach would be a step forward in the effort to fight obesity and other diet-related health illnesses faced by Americans today.

The Challenge
Increasing access to healthier food and beverage options in public spaces can be part of an effective, low-cost policy, systems and environmental improvement strategy in the fight against rising obesity rates. In Montgomery County, which borders the nation’s capital and is the most populous county in Maryland, 57 percent of its adults and 20 percent of its teens are overweight or obese. In 2016, the Montgomery County Council adopted contracting changes that required at last 50 percent of food and beverages stocked in its vending machines to meet nutrition standards limiting fat, salt and sugar content. But a Nutritional Environment Measures Surveys (NEMS) survey conducted by the American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program on county machines revealed that none of the vendors were following contract guidelines. In fact, more than 60 percent of the machines were instead carrying mostly unhealthy items.

“By increasing choices for packaged snack foods and beverages in vending, we aim to make the county a healthier place to live, work and play.”
— Shawn McIntosh, executive director for Sugar Free Kids
The Solution
After getting results back from the NEMS surveys on county vendors, the American Heart Association worked with members of Sugar Free Kids Maryland as the coalition supported the initial goal requiring vending machines be stocked with a minimum of 50 percent of the drinks and packaged snack food sold in all county vending machines that meet the American Heart Association’s recommended healthy food and beverage guidelines for sugar, salt, fat and other measures. The policy would require all vending machines to meet the 50 percent requirement by July 2017. The proportion of healthy food and beverages would then go up to 65 percent by July 2018.

Sustaining Success
Healthy vending requirements would codify guidelines already in place, but not being implemented. A majority of the county partners and leaders have expressed support for the proposed policy. The desire is for it to be adopted in the spring.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Montgomery County leaders and decision makers are considering an approach that would require at least half of all items sold in vending machines located on county property to meet the American Heart Association’s healthy food and beverage guidelines. Once approved, the effort would initiate a policy, systems and environmental change as all machines would carry healthier options by July 2017. Similar approaches are underway in Baltimore and the District of Columbia. Most recently, in March 2017, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission adopted the American Heart Association’s healthy food and beverage vending standards in Montgomery County. The approach in Montgomery County would create a policy, systems and environmental change that could extend to other neighboring jurisdictions.

Results
The healthier vending effort would have an effect on food and beverage offerings sold in 168 vending machines found on county property, including libraries, police stations and government office buildings. This would have an impact on the roughly 40,000 government employees who work at county sites. It also has the potential to have an effect on up to one million residents who call Montgomery County home. A local champion, County Councilman George Leventhal, said the government has a role to set a healthy example for its employees and residents by actively determining what products are sold on government property. “We’re just simply trying to put into action guidelines that are consistently applied with our overall goal, and that is that we want Montgomery County to be the healthiest county in America,” he said.

Get Involved
Learn more about the healthy vending as well as other American Heart Association’s efforts to improve the food environment by AHA’s Healthy Food and Beverage Toolkit.