A healthy diet and lifestyle are the best weapons in fighting against heart disease and other chronic health problems. But making smart dietary choices can be difficult at public events and gatherings, particularly at entertainment venues, where few healthy food and beverage options are traditionally sold. To help build a culture of health across Rhode Island, the state Department of Health formally adopted nutrition guidelines recommended by the American Heart Association. It also has been working with the American Heart Association (AHA)’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program staff to help apply the guidelines across state initiatives. This has meant selling healthier food and drinks in cafes and vending machines in state government buildings, as well as working with low-income communities where diet-related diseases are common. The AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines also have influenced changes at the concession stands of many sporting venues that now offer healthier options.

The Challenge
Rhode Island has an obesity problem: 63 percent of its adults are overweight or obese. Overall wellness can be affected by economic and social conditions. The cities of Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Providence are noted for greater health disparities because of poorer social determinants of health. Thirty-four percent of Central Falls adults, for example, are affected by poor physical or mental health anywhere from eight to 30 days a month, according to one 2016 community health needs assessment.

Obesity is a leading factor in developing heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes and other health issues that often stem from poor, unhealthy diets.

“The partnership with the entertainment venues has been a win-win – these venues keep customers happy by meeting their demand for healthier options, while we boost access to healthier foods at popular community venues.”

– Lauren Conkey, food system specialist, Rhode Island Department of Health
The Solution
As a result of ongoing work with the AHA to improve the food environments in various settings, the state Department of Health formally adopted AHA's healthy food and beverage guidelines. Among the recipients benefitting from the new dietary recommendations are the professional sporting venues in Pawtucket, Central Falls and Providence. The catering companies working with these sites have added healthier options to their concession menus, which now include entrées, snacks and drinks that have lower sodium, fat, and sugar, and fewer calories. The Rhode Island health department also is working with AHA to incorporate the nutrition guidelines at sites where food or beverages are served or sold within the state’s ten “health equity zones,” which are economically and socially underserved areas where wellness officials are trying to eliminate health disparities.

Sustaining Success
The AHA’s Rhode Island ANCHOR staff helped the state health department adopt and apply the AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines to foods served and sold throughout the state where people work, play and live. In particular, this has resulted in healthier food and beverage options on menus at food courts inside entertainment and sporting venues, including the Dunkin Donuts Center and McCoy Stadium. Electronic billboards now inform hungry consumers: “Healthy food options now available at concession stands.” Salads, roasted nuts and other healthful meals and snacks can easily be spotted on menus by a specially designated “healthy checkmark” icon next to it.

“Through this initiative, we’ve been able to reach over a million people per year with healthier options and messages about health,” says Lauren Conkey, Food System Specialist for the Rhode Island Department of Health. At the community level, an increasing number of organizations working under the health equity zone umbrella are being trained how to adopt healthy food and beverage policies, which has improved the food sold and served to staff and local low-income residents. And, those buying food and beverages from vending machines and cafeterias in state buildings are now able to identify the healthiest options, as the items that meet the nutrition guidelines are marked.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The adoption of the AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines is a systems change that will result in healthier food and beverage options becoming available to Rhode Island residents at concession stands within stadiums, through public vending machines and cafeterias, and at local community meetings and events.

Results
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Get Involved
Simple changes – like replacing fried potato chips with fresh fruit at lunch – can be all that is necessary to adapt to healthier dietary guidelines. The AHA offers a Food and Beverage Toolkit that provides other practical steps and suggestions for improving the food environment and promoting a culture of health where people live, work and volunteer. A toolkit is available for community and organization members, as well as one for employers and the work place.