Adding healthier snacks to vending machines is a significant step to helping consumers make wiser food choices – as long as they know those healthy options exist. The dietician at Oklahoma’s Tinker Air Force Base is working to improve access to better food throughout base sites. One such effort involved partnering with the American Heart Association on a healthier vending initiative that resulted in an increase from 35% to 50% in healthier snacks offered to buyers. The initiative has had a great impact through the base, where many employees find themselves relying on snack machines to replace meals when they don’t have time to leave their office. Providing healthier options can empower consumers to make wiser food choices that can impact their weight and overall well-being.

**The Challenge**

Oklahoma has a rapidly growing obesity problem. The state has the eighth highest adult obesity rate in the nation. Currently, about 34 percent of the adults in the state are obese, compared to the 20 percent in 2000, and 10 percent in 1990. Obesity puts a person at higher risk for health problems, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and diabetes. Obesity often stems from poor diets and making unhealthy choices. Providing healthier vending options, particularly at work places or on public grounds, can be a step in helping people who want to make better food decisions.

“After our first taste test we were able to immediately make a healthy change to our vending machines and will continue to use this type event to increase the knowledge and sales of the healthy items.”

– Wendi Knowles, Tinker Air Force Base dietician
The Solution
The Tinker Air Force Base dietician worked with the vendor who stocks all of the snack machines on base, getting nutritional guidance and marketing support from the American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program. Together, the initiative set a goal of raising the percentage of healthy items offered in the machines from 35 percent to 50 percent. ANCHOR organized taste-testing events featuring the healthier items to help raise awareness about the new options. Previous efforts to stock healthy snacks in vending machines had resulted in poor sales of the products. In an effort to determine why, the vending manager engaged in discussions with consumers on the base during events. It was revealed that many people hadn’t been aware that the vending machines were stocked with healthy items — or anything beyond traditional candy bars and junk food. To ensure that staff at the Air Force Base were aware of the efforts to stock the vending machines with healthier options, a variety of communication materials to educate consumers were developed.

Sustaining Success
The vendor began selling out of his newly added healthier snacks within weeks of adding them to his machines. This prompted his commitment to maintaining a high level of snacks low in sugar, fat and calories. Tinker’s dietician will continue working with the vendor to help find additional healthy options for consumers. In addition, she’s been working on strategies to share Tinker’s healthy vending efforts with other military bases around the country.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
After getting positive responses to the healthier snacks offered at taste test events, the vending manager at Tinker immediately added those items to more than 35 machines throughout the base. By meeting with his consumers and learning about their taste preferences and purchasing habits, the vendor will continue to adapt his offerings to meet the needs of customers and their desire for healthier food.

Results
The healthy vending initiative on base has had an impact on one of Oklahoma County’s largest employers, its approximately 26,000 employees, and the thousands of guests who visit the base. More than 35 snack machines located in medical, military and office buildings across Tinker Air Force Base are now being filled with more healthy options than ever before. Half of all the content offered in those machines now meet national nutritional standards for school’s nutrition guidelines for vending snacks low in sugar, sodium and calories. The initiative also prompted a chain reaction that extended to the manager who runs all food services for the base: He is now selling the healthy snacks desired by consumers but can’t be stocked on base vending machines because of contract conflicts with the vendor’s supplier. Those healthier items are now being sold at the base cafeteria and other food service areas.

Get Involved
Interested in seeing healthier items sold at the snack and beverage machines in your office? Find out who the local vendor is and reach out! Learn about the steps the vendor can take to contribute to a healthier work environment. To discover other ways to promote a culture of wellness, check out the AHA’s Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit.