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TULSA HEALTHY VENDING CAMPAIGN

CHANGE CAN HAPPEN



THE UNITED STATES is in the grips of a public health crisis, the primary cause of which is linked to two key factors—unhealthy eating and a lack of physical activity.

The two, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), have become the key drivers behind increased rates of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer. The medical and health-care costs associated with this public health crisis are enormous. The CDC estimates that the annual medical cost of obesity in the U.S.—the primary factor behind these illnesses—was \$147 billion in 2008 U.S. dollars, and the medical costs for people who are obese were \$1,429 higher than those of normal weight.ⁱ

One of the reasons for this unhealthy trend among many Americans is diets high in sugars, saturated and trans fats and sodium, and low in healthier foods such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture's *2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* states that a healthy diet consists, in part, of "an eating pattern low in added sugars, saturated fats and sodium." The guidelines further recommend that Americans "cut back on foods and beverages higher in these components to amounts that fit within healthy eating patterns."ⁱⁱ



VoicesforHealthyKids.org

Vending machines are often a source of these unhealthy foods. Many of the offerings contained within vending machines are high in sugars, saturated fats and sodium, such as candy, cookies, chips and sugary drinks. Vending machines on public property, such as state and city office buildings, libraries and parks, are no different.

One study found that vending machines on state and local property are stocked primarily with unhealthy products.ⁱⁱⁱ Sales of vending machine offerings in the United States are enormous. In 2013, the vending machine industry saw revenues of just under \$20 billion.^{iv}



policy was designed to impact vending machines located on city properties, including public libraries, parks, nature centers, a convention center and community centers, and city office buildings. The policy would ensure greater access to healthier food and beverage options, as well as use calorie labeling to provide basic education on nutritional value of what is available.

The campaign had two intended outcomes. The first was to improve the nutritional quality of vended foods and beverages for Tulsa's 3,500 employees, and for the city's 395,000 residents, when they visit city properties and make purchases from vending machines. Vending machines on city properties are a primary daytime source of snacks and drinks for some of Tulsa's roughly 3,500 city employees.

The second outcome was to "lead by example." By adopting evidence-based nutrition standards for its vending machines, the City of Tulsa would be sending the message to residents that ensuring access to healthier offerings is important and a priority. Making the offerings available to city employees and members of the public visiting city property would also help to demonstrate the desire of food consumers in Tulsa to purchase healthier products when given the option to do so.

The effort began in 2014. The staff of the American Heart Association put in place a detailed campaign designed to not only show why the policy was needed, but also to demonstrate broad support for passage of the policy. The campaign culminated in the summer of 2015 with the mayor's office issuing an Executive Order and Policy Memorandum outlining the development and implementation of nutrition standards for healthier foods and beverages in vending machines in buildings and property owned or leased by the city.

“Oklahoma currently has the sixth highest adult obesity rate in the nation...”

The State of Oklahoma and the City of Tulsa are not strangers to either the obesity epidemic or unhealthy vending machine sales. Oklahoma currently has the sixth highest adult obesity rate in the nation, according to *The State of Obesity: Better Policies for a Healthier America*. The adult obesity rate is currently 33.0 percent, up from 20.1 percent in 2000 and from 10.3 percent in 1990.^v In 2010, 30.2 percent of Tulsa County residents were obese and 36.1 were overweight. As these rates have increased, Tulsa County has witnessed a corresponding increase in rates of diabetes and high blood pressure.^{vi}

THE TULSA, OKLAHOMA HEALTHY VENDING CAMPAIGN:

It was into this environment that the Southwest Affiliate of the American Heart Association engaged in a campaign to ensure that vending machines on public property in Tulsa contain offerings that meet evidenced-based nutrition standards. The proposed

ⁱⁱⁱ) Bishop, K., Friedman, E., & Wootan, M.G. (2014, October). Vending Contradictions: Snack and beverage options on public property. Center for Science in the Public Interest. Retrieved from <http://cspinet.org/vendingcontradictions.pdf> ^{iv}) Reformat, E. (2014, June). Technology empowers operators in 2013. Automatic Merchandiser. Retrieved from http://media.cygnus.com/files/base/VMW/document/2014/06/autm-0614sovi-final_11526581.pdf ^v) Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2015). The State of Obesity in Oklahoma. Retrieved from <http://stateofobesity.org/states/ok/> ^{vi}) Oklahoma State Department of Health. (2010, Spring). State of the County's Health Report: Tulsa County. Retrieved from <https://www.ok.gov/health2/documents/CEE-Tulsa%20County%202010.pdf>

THE FIVE-STEP CAMPAIGN:

The campaign to get the City of Tulsa to adopt evidence-based nutrition standards for its vending machines included five key steps. These steps were designed to “arm” the advocates, educate policy makers and stakeholders and to secure passage of the policy. As a follow-up to the campaign’s success, the advocates thanked Tulsa policymakers for their support.



STEP ONE *research*

In the beginning stages of the campaign, advocates of the healthy vending policy conducted extensive research to develop a better understanding of the vending industry, policy environment, stakeholders and public opinion. They did so to equip themselves with the information and knowledge to not only engage in intelligent conversations on the issue, but also to heighten the likelihood of success.

One of the first steps advocates took was to create a list of all of the potential stakeholders involved in vending machine policies and use. Included in the list were city leaders, representatives of the human resources department, employee groups and unions and vending machine companies. Coupled with brainstorming key stakeholders was research to determine who had jurisdiction over the vending machines, what vested interests were likely to be engaged in the process of adopting a healthy vending policy and what were the policy interests of the mayor and his staff.

Research was also conducted into the vending machine operators. At the local level in Oklahoma, municipalities can contract with local companies. In the case of Tulsa, there were three vending companies doing business with the city. One was a beverage company and the other two were engaged in snack and coffee vending.

During the research phase, advocates discovered that City Hall already had healthy vending offerings. That important discovery provided a tool for advocates to show and argue that if such a healthy vending policy was important for City Hall, it was also important for other public buildings and locations. The presence of healthier vending options in City Hall also showed that such a policy had support and had been successfully implemented on a small scale.

To help build support for a healthy vending policy and to demonstrate the “why” behind the policy, advocates did research into the health of citizens in Tulsa and surrounding areas. Using data from the Tulsa City Health Department, advocates were able to determine chronic disease rates in the county. In addition, they reviewed policies from places with similar mindsets and political settings to determine the process for passing those policies, as well as how the policies were working.

Lastly, to help demonstrate public support for the proposed policy, advocates sought out funding to conduct a poll involving Tulsa-area residents. The poll’s focus included concerns about obesity rates, the likelihood of residents buying healthier foods, the perceived availability of healthy foods in vending machines and the role the city should play in promoting healthy food choices. The poll’s findings indicated that there was a broad consensus among residents of Tulsa in support of the city being a leader in promoting healthier choices, and that residents of Tulsa were more likely to purchase healthier food or beverages if they were more readily available.



STEP TWO *interacting with stakeholders and decision makers*

Once the research was conducted, advocates of the healthy vending policy began to reach out to stakeholders and decision makers. Those contacts included the staffs of the mayor, human resources, and procurement departments. The Tulsa County Wellness Partnership, a coalition that focuses on health and wellness, provided guidance to advocates on which other stakeholders to engage, such as the health

department staff. Engagement with the health department led to discussions around how they successfully added healthy vending offerings in their own building. Not only did the health department agree to support the healthy vending policy, it provided additional contacts that would be helpful in the campaign.

“Engagement with the health department led to discussions around how they successfully added healthy vending offerings in their own building.”

City employees – the primary beneficiaries of a healthy vending policy, were also engaged with information about the benefits of providing healthier offerings on public property. Meetings were held with representatives of the firefighters’ union. During the meetings advocates discovered that vending machines commonly are the only easy source of food for firefighters during their shifts. That discovery eventually led to the head of the firefighters’ union agreeing to sign a letter of support for the policy—a letter that proved to have a significant and positive impact on the debate.

City mayor - ultimately the policy had to be approved by the city mayor. However, the initial conversations with him were more exploratory in nature and designed to gauge his interest and level of support rather than pushing for his support. In addition to providing him with information on the proposed policy, the mayor was invited to speak at an American Heart Association stroke-focused event, and was asked to issue a proclamation for the event. That interaction, although unrelated to the healthy vending policy, helped to create awareness with the mayor about the organization and its mission.



STEP THREE *preparing and executing the outreach tools*

Once key stakeholders were contacted and their stances on healthy vending determined, advocates prepared a set of outreach tools. The tools were designed to educate policymakers on the issue, show its benefit to city employees and the public at large, and demonstrate community support for the initiative. The tools all had a consistent message, including the positive health benefits of a healthy vending, the desire of the public to have access to healthier vending options and that the proposed policy was evidence-based.

THE TOOLS INCLUDED:



A fact sheet, which detailed what the policy would do and a listing of sample options.



Polling results, which were distributed, demonstrating public support for health-based policies and public desire to have access to healthier vending options.



A mail-in postcard, which showed the benefits of healthy vending and public support for the policy.



A petition of public support from change.org, which helped collect prewritten public letters of support, which were obtained and held in reserve in case strong opposition to the policy appeared.



A letter from the president of the local firefighters union, which demonstrated strong city employee support for the policy.

Once the tools were prepared, they were disseminated to policymakers and key city leaders. The combined tools had a positive impact on the process, not only showing community support for the initiative, but also the health-based reasons behind it. The letter from the president of the local firefighters' union—a large well-respected public employees union in Tulsa—was particularly effective in showing public employee support for the policy. Because advocates were operating in an environment with little opposition, the combined tools helped create an overwhelmingly positive environment for the approval of the policy.



STEP FOUR *policy approval*

Public health advocates commonly face powerful opposition to even small changes in public policy designed to improve health. However, due to the ground work done by advocates in Tulsa, the public support that existed for the policy, and the positive supportive nature of the tools, passage of the Tulsa healthy vending policy was somewhat anticlimactic. By the time the vote took place to adopt the policy, the mayor had become a particularly powerful supporter.

The final Executive Order and Policy Memorandum approved by the city and signed by the city attorney ensures that vending machines located on city properties will meet recommended nutrition standards to provide patrons with healthier options, as well as use calorie labeling to provide basic education on nutritional value of what is available. The policy directly benefits Tulsa's 3,500 city employees as well as many of the city's 395,000 residents—including approximately 100,000 children—who visit city property where vending machines are located. The policy will also help create a "ripple effect" by the City of Tulsa creating an environment that establishes the importance of healthy beverages and snacks in not only their vending machines but snack and beverage venues throughout the city.

“The final order... ensures that vending machines located on city properties will meet recommended nutrition standards to provide patrons with healthier options...”



STEP FIVE *saying thank you*

In many successful public policy campaigns, advocates view the passage of a policy, or the approval of a law or regulation, as the end of the campaign. Fortunately, advocates in the Tulsa healthy vending campaign recognized that an additional step was needed after the Executive Order and Policy Memorandum were approved and signed. That step was to thank city officials, especially the mayor's office, which had been instrumental in helping to move the policy forward. Advocates issued a news release commending the city, sent a thank you letter from the board of directors of the American Heart Association, and ran a thank you ad in the newspaper.

Saying thank you not only showed a genuine appreciation for the actions of city officials, strategically it was a wise step. Healthy vending policies are only a small piece, albeit an important piece, of the overall strategy to improve public health in Tulsa, as well as elsewhere. Leaving the impression that not only is their mission genuine and rooted in science, but that they are sincere in their appreciation of city leaders and others for helping to pass policies for the betterment of public health, sets the stage for future policy actions by advocates.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Several key lessons were learned by advocates who worked to get the City of Tulsa to issue a healthy vending policy. Those lessons included:



Developing an early understanding of the city’s decision making process, the policy and the dynamics of politics in city hall. Those discoveries allowed advocates to engage the city efficiently and effectively throughout the process to issue a healthy vending policy.



Creating effective messages early in the process that would resonate with city leaders and other stakeholders. Those messages and associated terms had to be easy to understand and then included in multiple communication vehicles to allow for repetition to help the message “stick.” Effective messages included grassroots support for the policy, the policy’s positive impact on the health of Tulsa residents and the desire of employees and the public at-large to have access to healthy vending offerings.



Understanding the benefit of getting the city’s input with the creation of the policy, instead of pushing them to support something they had no part in crafting. Engaging the city in the development of the policy created much greater buy-in.



Grassroots support was critical to the effort. Demonstrating the support of city employees and the general public for the policy, created an easier atmosphere for decision makers to adopt the policy. The support of the firefighters’ union, a direct beneficiary of a healthy vending policy, was especially key to showing grassroots support.



Not forcing decision makers to support the policy early in the process. The initial interaction with city leaders was primarily to gauge their stance on the issue and to educate them as to the proposed policy’s benefits and support. Forcing city decision makers to commit to the policy early in the process likely would have led to several taking stances in opposition that would have been difficult to roll back later in the process. This was also why advocates chose to “fly below the radar” rather than publicly promote the campaign early in earned and social-media venues.