

Los Angeles County Uses The Power of the Purse to Get Healthy Food in County Vending Machines and Cafeterias

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Michelle Wood,

Program Manager, Food Procurement and Policy, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health,
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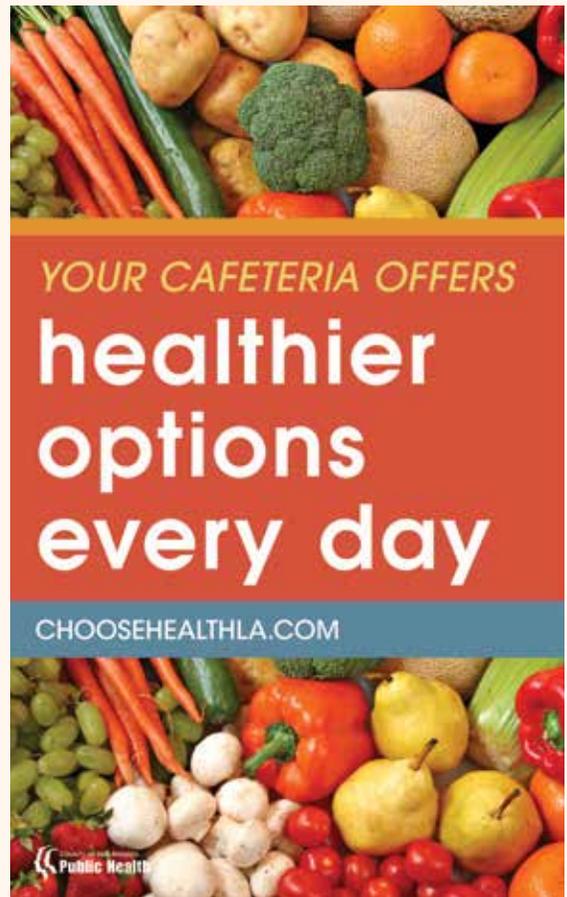
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Director, Los Angeles Policy Food Council

Local governments are constantly looking for new and effective ways to improve the health of residents and counter rising rates of chronic illness like diabetes and heart disease. In 2010, Los Angeles County decided that one of the most powerful tools it had at its disposal was the power of the purse. The county has contracts with businesses that supply approximately 37 million meals that get consumed by more than 100,000 county employees and hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors per year. These businesses stock the vending machines where workers and residents buy snacks and beverages and serve the food that is offered in county cafeterias at hospitals and to institutionalized populations such as in county juvenile halls. They also provide the food sold at concession stands at parks, beaches and golf courses.

As officials with the county’s Department of Public Health began to think about ways they could improve the nutritional quality of



Key Accomplishments

- 2011: The County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors passed the Healthy Food Promotion in Los Angeles County Food Service Contracts motion.
- Public Health partnered with six county departments to institutionalize the healthy food procurement Board motion.
- Over 400 vending machines in approximately 200 locations in the county are selling healthier beverages such as water, 100% fruit juice, and lower-calorie beverages and snacks.
- Strategies to increase the selection of healthier food options including fruit and vegetables are being implemented in county facilities (e.g., product placement, pricing strategies, and gradual sodium reduction).



foods consumed by county employees and users of county facilities, they saw an opportunity in the contracts the county executes with suppliers of food. They drafted, and the Board of Supervisors passed, a policy establishing nutrition standards covering every county department and facility that purchases, distributes or sells food and beverages. The procurement policy requires food vendors contracting with county departments to meet specified nutrition standards, including limits on calories, sugar and sodium, while supporting locally grown foods. “The County of Los Angeles government is leveraging the purchasing power of its departments by utilizing the contractual process to integrate healthy nutrition standards into practice. It’s an affirmation of the county’s commitment to the long-term health of its employees and residents” said Michelle Wood, Program Manager, Food Procurement and Policy, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

What’s the Problem?

In 2011, 24% of adults and nearly as high a percentage of children were obese in Los Angeles County,¹ increasing their risk of developing Type 2 diabetes and other diet-related health conditions including heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke. These conditions don’t just take a toll on individuals and families, they also increase healthcare costs and lead to lost productivity and increased absenteeism from work and school. Los Angeles County loses about \$6 billion annually from diet-related healthcare costs and lost productivity, according to a 2009 study commissioned by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.²



Why It Matters

Convenience foods, sugary beverages, and “grab and go” meals loaded with fat, calories, sugar and sodium have become increasingly common in the past 30 years and are sold in many county facilities. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and Department of Public Health officials realized that the county was contributing to the problem when it could—and should—be part of the solution.

Los Angeles County government provides 37 million meals per year to its 100,000 employees and to hundreds of thousands of visitors and patrons who use county facilities. The workplace is an especially important place to offer healthy foods, because employees spend a large part of each day at work. LA County Public Health officials also realized that if their department was to be an effective advocate for improving nutrition and creating healthier workplaces, the effort had to begin in-house.

What We're Doing

The first step in establishing a countywide procurement policy was for the Department of Public Health to conduct a needs assessment with all County departments that purchase, distribute or sell food, evaluating barriers to improving nutrition and assessing the prospects of a food procurement policy. The assessment found that most departments believed they had the authority to impose nutrition standards and that promoting greater access to healthy foods and beverages would help promote healthy behaviors and decrease preventable chronic diseases.

In 2011, the procurement policy was introduced to the County Board of Supervisors by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas (2nd District). The “Healthy Food Promotion in Los Angeles County Food Service Contracts” motion called on county government to leverage its purchasing power to embed requirements for healthy food and beverage options into food-service contracts. The measure named the Department of Public Health to oversee implementation.

Public Health identified 12 other county departments that offer or sell food and beverages in their cafeterias, snack shops, and other food-service venues. Interviews were conducted with representatives of each department to introduce the program and learn more about their food environments and contracting processes.

Most departments use a competitive solicitation process to contract with external vendors that supply or sell food. Public Health staff apply nutrition standards, provide ongoing technical support around menus and nutrition guidelines, train staff that handle food-service contracts, share best practices, and evaluate how different departments are implementing the new policy.



In 2011, Public Health created an advisory committee with a number of community organizations and food policy experts and advocates, including the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, American Diabetes Association, American Heart Association, California Food Policy Advocates, and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. This committee helped guide the implementation and evaluation of the initiative. “The Department of Public Health provided a tremendous amount of expertise in nutrition and health, helping to shape our own understanding of healthier food procurement,” said Alexa Delwiche, Managing Director, Los Angeles Policy Food Council.

The impact of the new policy is already having an effect. Snacks sold in county vending machines must be less than 250 calories, and be low in sodium and fat. Beverages may not exceed 25 calories per 8 oz. serving. On-site cafeterias are starting to implement recommended practices such as offering healthier entrees, providing no-cost tap water during meal times, and aligning meals with the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Public Health provides “Choose Health LA” display signs that promote healthy options and educate the public about nutritious foods. Healthy foods and beverages are displayed near checkout registers, while water and healthier beverage options are placed at eye level. “We are working to raise more visibility around healthy nutrition with county employees and the community who access county programs and facilities,” says Michelle Wood. “We educate people about healthy food through promotional signs in worksite cafeterias, decals on vending machines, and signs promoting fruits and vegetables at salad bars.”

To date, Public Health has partnered with six county departments to implement the nutrition standards outlined in their food service contracts. The county's Chief Executive Office administers a food service contract for vending machines selling healthy snacks and beverages found at more than 400 machines in approximately 200 locations. Multiple departments are working to implement nutrition policies in their on-site cafeterias or cafes, promoting healthier entrees, eliminating fried food options, selling smaller fountain drinks, and making tap water easily accessible during meal times.

What's Next

Adoption and implementation of procurement practices that mandate healthy nutrition standards is bringing sustainable change to the food environment in county facilities and offices. Public Health continues to work with other departments and to track food-service contracts that come up for renewal. Looking ahead, Public Health is evaluating the effectiveness of food procurement policies across county government to better understand trends, outcomes, and best practices.

The development of ongoing relationships with county departments has been important in helping staff members to think about health and nutrition in a new way. "The work just begins once you establish a healthy food procurement policy," says Wood.

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