



# THE PATH TO HEALTHY VENDING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

## OVERVIEW

On average, U.S. workers spend one-third of the day at their jobs in workplace environments located outside of the home.<sup>1</sup> Employers have a great opportunity and incentive to design workplaces to support health. Fostering a healthier workforce can lower direct costs to the employer and positively impact staff productivity and morale.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, employers are required by law to create a safe environment that keeps staff free from injury or harm. Yet, policies or practices that support employee health and wellness are not always in place or robust in the workplace.

As the largest employer in its region,<sup>3</sup> the County of Los Angeles ('County') has embraced the opportunity to promote health and wellness in the workplace. This commitment includes improving the food that is offered and sold on County property. As one of its first wellness policy decisions, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors approved a motion in 2006 to require healthy vending machines on County property.

## THE COMMUNITY

Los Angeles County (LAC) is home to a diverse population of more than 10 million residents.<sup>4</sup> County government alone employs nearly 100,000 staff representing 37

departments. In addition, many residents – often from low-income, underserved communities – are frequent visitors of County facilities.

Diet-related chronic diseases are a major health concern in LAC. In the region, 10% of adults have diabetes<sup>5</sup> and 27% have been diagnosed with hypertension.<sup>6</sup> Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of premature death.<sup>4</sup> Direct medical costs associated with diabetes in

## KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND IMPACT

### After 100% healthy vending was implemented:

- The average sodium per snack **offered** in vending machines decreased by approximately 30%, from 295 mg to 205 mg.
- Preliminary findings suggest levels of calories, sodium, and sugar **consumed** decreased:
  - Average calories per snack reduced by over 40%, from 265 kcal to 159 kcal
  - Average sodium per snack reduced by 35%, from 290 mg of sodium to 188 mg of sodium
  - Average sugar per snack reduced by 47%, from 12 g to 6 g
  - Average sugar per beverage reduced by 89%, from 34g to 4g

the County are estimated to be \$6.4 billion per year.<sup>7</sup>

By focusing on improvements to the foods and beverages it offers in vending machines, the County is moving away from offering many of the food products that contribute to an increased risk of chronic disease. These include beverages and snack foods laden with calories, added sugars, salt, and saturated fat. Now, County employees and visitors are likely to encounter healthy vending machines stocked with foods and beverages consistent with a healthy diet: water, low-calorie drinks, and whole-grain snacks that contain limited calories, sugar, and salt.

## THE PROJECT

The vision for healthier vending came about in 2002 when, out of concern for the rising prevalence of diet and lifestyle-related diseases, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors convened a Blue Ribbon Task Force to develop recommendations for County action. The task force identified workplace wellness as a top priority, thus laying the groundwork for the 2006 board motion that established the County of Los Angeles Vending Machine Nutrition Policy.

Subsequent to the motion, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) began to implement the policy. The policy included a phase-in approach which required that 25% of products comply with the nutrition standards by 2007, increasing to 33% of products by 2009, and 50% by 2011. By 2009, the policy had been amended two more times; the Board strengthened it to require that all future contracts with vending operators specify 100% healthy vending, and

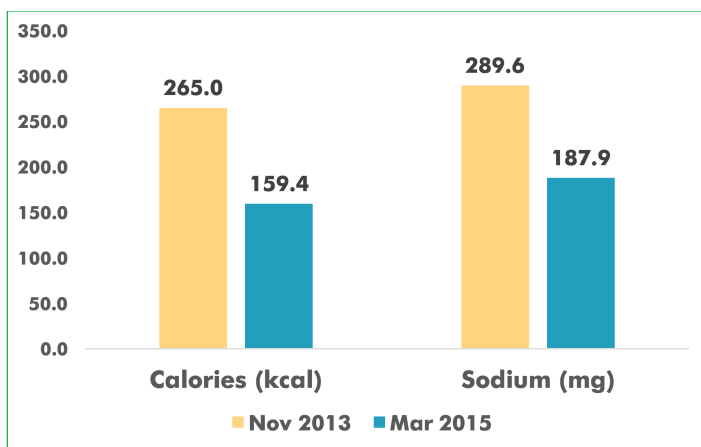


Figure 1: Average calorie and sodium intake per snack at the beginning of implementation compared to post-implementation, 2013-2015.

*"I knew the policy was really working, when the vending company opted to place images of water on the exterior of the machines instead of caloric drinks. Our efforts were visible not just in the products being sold, but in the marketing itself. Over time there was less discussion about why the changes were happening. It started to become the new norm."*

- Michelle Wood  
Program Manager, Food Procurement and Policy  
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

the nutrition standards were modified. California had recently established statewide school vending guidelines, and alignment of County of Los Angeles standards with the states' more than doubled the number of product lines that would meet the criteria.<sup>8</sup>

In 2010, DPH received support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Sodium Reduction in Communities Program* and the *Communities Putting Prevention to Work* grant to expand healthy vending efforts. In support of these efforts, the Board of Supervisors approved a motion in 2011 requiring all County departments to consult with DPH before developing and/or renewing food service and vending contracts.

The 2011 motion opened the door for DPH to partner with the Chief Executive Office (CEO) – the department that administers the largest vending machine contract in the County – on an upcoming vending request for proposal (RFP). DPH integrated the County's vending machine nutrition policy into the RFP which established limits on calories, sodium, sugar, and saturated fat. Guidelines on placement and pricing of water, and the requirement that vending machine exterior product advertising align with the policies' nutrition standards were also included. Compass USA was awarded a 10-year contract with the County. LaVern Dale, the contract manager for the CEO noted that because Compass USA is a global company with a large U.S. client list, it "was able to offer us healthy selections that were already being used by companies with similar vending standards, such as Kaiser Permanente."

# STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE FOOD OFFERINGS IN VENDING MACHINES

## 1 **Change doesn't usually happen all at once.**

The County of Los Angeles' vending machine policy is a strong model that contains evidence-based nutrition standards, supportive guidelines on product marketing, and monitoring requirements. But Michelle Wood, Program Manager, Food Procurement and Policy at DPH, is careful to note that the policy didn't begin that way – it took an incremental approach. By reporting back to the Board of Supervisors periodically, DPH was able to recommend improvements to the motion based on its lessons learned and best practices from the field.

## 2 **Vending policies can specify more than nutrition standards.**

The County's vending policy contains a provision that bottled water should be priced no higher than other beverage options, and that it should be placed at eye level or in the highest-selling position. This change came about due to growing evidence that nutrition standards are not the only factors that incentivize healthier choices – pricing, placement, and promotion are important, too. Furthermore, the policy aligns all promotional images on vending machine exteriors with nutrition standards. Vendors are also required to post calorie information for beverages.

## 3 **Champions are made, not born.**

Brenda Robles, Evaluation Lead for Nutrition and Health Programs at DPH, said that taking time to share program goals and provide education to stakeholders paved the way for successful implementation. "Partners who are often initially resistant to the vending policy became supportive once the stakeholder learned more about nutrition. They have become some of our biggest champions," she said.

## 4 **Evaluate impact and create a sustainable monitoring plan.**

Once the vending contract with Compass USA was in place, DPH evaluators developed a plan for evaluating the impact of the policy change. Due to the size and scope of the program – the contract affected over 300 machines, in more than 150 locations – DPH monitored a random sample of vending machines to track changes in product lines, ensure fidelity to the new standards, and gauge patron receptivity. Moving forward, DPH Epidemiology Analyst Ranjana Wickramasekaran underscored the need for further streamlining: "We have developed a self-assessment tool that will shift the monitoring process over to County contract managers to create new champions by involving contract managers in the monitoring process."



## MAKING PROGRESS

In 2014, under its new contract with the CEO, Compass USA installed its 100% healthy vending machines across County sites. In addition to the many departments that serve as workplaces for County employees, the contract reached departments that provide services to vulnerable populations, including Children and Family Services, Community and Senior Services, Mental Health, Military Affairs, and the County Library System. DPH estimates that, every day, more than 45,000 employees and 15,000 visitors' frequent County departments in which these machines are installed.

During its collaboration to secure the contract with Compass USA, DPH and CEO achieved another win when it secured the Sheriff's Department support of healthy vending. The Sheriff's Department had managed its own vending contract for decades, and was exempted from the 2006 County vending policy. DPH received

notice that the Sheriff's Department had sent a formal request to all of its 70 stations to join CEO in contracting with Compass USA.

A full year of monitoring and data collection has shown that the vending policy is having its intended impact. Sodium contained in vending machine snacks have decreased, on average, by approximately 30%. Preliminary vending data findings indicate that the average calories consumed per snack dropped by 40% while the average sodium consumed per snack has dropped by about 35%, from 290 mg to 188 mg. Vending data also showed that the average sugar consumed per beverage dropped by nearly 90%. "Actually seeing the outcome showed us that our policy is feasible to implement" said Wood. "The standards caused our vendor to modify its offerings." In the long run, such large reductions in consumption of nutrients of concern, like sodium, could translate to improved health and lower healthcare costs.

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