



An Evaluation of the Integrated Healthcare Association (IHA) Healthy Alternatives Vending Program for Employers

Conducted by:

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**Integrated Healthcare Association (IHA)
Healthy Alternatives Vending Program
2008 Evaluation Report**

Survey Methodology

In January 2005, the IHA board passed a resolution to develop and promote a Healthy Alternatives food policy for vending machines at IHA member organizations. Since then, 20 IHA member organizations have adopted the vending policy and have begun implementation. To assess the degree to which healthy vending programs have become entrenched within organizations and the perceived success of these programs, in 2007 IHA conducted a program evaluation.

All IHA Board member organizations were invited to participate in the evaluation, which entailed a survey conducted by telephone. The evaluation was conducted by Margie Powers of Margie Powers Consulting, an independent health care consultant. Twenty organizations were invited to complete the survey, with 15 ultimately participating in an interview. In addition, three vending companies were interviewed to collect information about their own experiences in implementing healthy vending programs. The interviews were conducted August through November, 2007, using two survey instruments: one for organizations implementing the program and one for vendors (see the survey instruments at Attachment A).

It should be noted that in several cases the person ultimately interviewed did not have detailed information about the program—usually because the program had been initiated prior to their joining the organization, and there was sparse historical documentation about the program origins. Thus, while general information was obtained from all of the organizations, detailed information was more commonly available when the respondent was closely involved in the program from its inception.

Healthy Alternatives Implementation

Of the 15 survey respondents, 12 had implemented a healthy vending program at their organization. One organization had discussed implementation but never initiated the program, and two interviewees were not sure if the program had ever been implemented.

Of the 12 organizations that did implement Healthy Alternatives, eleven have continued the program. At seven organizations, the program has not only been implemented, but expanded. Four organizations have reduced the scope of their program. One organization has discontinued the program.

The Healthy Alternatives program calls for employers to voluntarily offer at least 50% healthy vending machine choices, defined in Table 1. These recommendations are based on well-established nutritional guidelines developed by experts for state legislation (SB19 and SB74) and modified to include sodium and trans-fat restrictions. They are based on guidelines from the USDA, HHS and FDA and are supported by health and nutrition groups in California including the American Heart Association and American Cancer Society.

Table 1 Proposed nutritional guidelines for Healthy Alternatives program

Nutritional Standards for Vending Machine Beverages and Snacks
<p>Beverages: 50% of beverages offered in each vending machine shall be one or a combination of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water • Coffee or tea • Reduced fat milk (including soy or cow’s milk, chocolate or other flavored milk not containing more than 15 grams of added sugar per 250 gram serving or 3 tsp sugar per 1 cup milk) • 100% fruit/vegetable juice • Fruit based drinks containing at least 50% juice and no added calorie sweeteners • All other non-caloric beverages, including diet sodas
<p>Snacks/Foods: 50% of snacks/foods offered in each vending machine shall meet the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not more than 35% calories from fat with the exception of nuts and seeds; snack mixes and other foods of which nuts are a part must meet the 35% standard • Not more than 10% of calories from saturated fat • Does not contain trans fat added during processing (hydrogenated oils and partially hydrogenated oils) • Not more than 35% total weight from sugar and calorie sweeteners with the exception of fruits and vegetables that have not been processed with added sweeteners or fats • At least one item meeting the snack criteria in each vending machine shall also meet the FDA criteria of “low sodium” (<140mg per serving).

Six of the organizations have a goal of at least 50% healthy snacks and beverages for their vending machines. Of these six, three have maintained that percentage, one is increasing to 75% in 2008, and two have lowered the percentage. One organization has 100% healthy snacks in their vending machines, three fall in a range of 15-35%, and one did not state the percentage.

Although almost all implementing organizations were requiring a certain percentage of healthy foods be placed in their machines, how each defined “healthy” varied. Three organizations mentioned using some version of the guidelines in Table 1 to guide their choices of healthy items, with the remaining organizations either not using a detailed guideline, or not being aware of one. Many organizations noted that when first implementing the program, vendors had a limited number of healthy snacks available, which limited their choices of what they could offer.

Since first implementing the program, seven organizations have expanded activities or services in conjunction with Healthy Alternatives. One organization is increasing the percentage of healthy food choices in their machines, and one is expanding the number of locations that house healthy vending machines. The remaining five organizations have embedded the Healthy Alternatives program in a larger program that encourages healthy eating and healthy lifestyles.

Employee Response

Of the 12 organizations that implemented Healthy Alternatives—with one ultimately discontinuing the program—employee response was decidedly mixed to the program. Three of the organizations felt that the employee response was positive, or largely positive. All of these organizations have since expanded the Healthy Alternatives program. Four of the organizations had a largely negative employee reaction to the program, and five deemed the response varied.

The most common reason for negative employee feedback is the removal of an employee’s favorite item from the vending machine. Several organizations noted that employees felt their food choices were being “policed”. Two organizations observed that while most employees did not comment on the new vending policy, those that did were a very vocal—and negative—minority.

Three organizations pointed to cultural or socio-economic factors being a driving force in food choices, with facilities housing blue-collar employees having a stronger inclination to purchase unhealthy items from the vending machines. Three

organizations also noted that the cost of the healthier items was viewed negatively by employees, with some commenting that they were too expensive.

Experience with Vendors

Organizations were split evenly in their view of vendor support of Healthy Alternatives. Six organizations felt positively about their vendors' involvement in the program, although two of these organizations stated that the vendors were initially reluctant to participate, and one felt that the vendor continued to need monitoring.

Six organizations believed the vendors were not supportive of their program. Each of these six organizations mentioned the vendors' concern about generating revenue from the healthy snacks. For example, the company that discontinued their Healthy Alternatives program noted that the vendor experienced a 30% decrease in cash flow in the first few months of implementing Healthy Alternatives. One organization noted that their vendor contractually could replace items that were not selling, and was "happy to show that the program was not working". One organization noted that they had to continually monitor the machines to confirm that healthy snacks were placed, and that despite the vendor's claim of a healthy snack program, they ultimately did not adhere to their policy.

Vendor Response

While organizations did not have entirely positive experiences with their vendors, the vendors themselves did not perceive problems in implementing programs and felt that they were delivering on what they had promised. Three vendors were interviewed, and each vending company stated that they had a formal healthy vending program in place.

All of the vending companies adhere to food and beverage guidelines for their healthy vending programs. One of the vending companies adheres to SB12 and SB19 guidelines, with the other two vending companies following the "35-10-35" (no more than 35% of a food's calories should come from fat, 10% from saturated fat and 35% from sugar) guideline. SB12 and SB19 include the 35-10-35 rule, but contain other guidelines as well, including restricting the total calories of the snack to 250 calories per serving.

Organizations implementing Healthy Alternatives noted reduced revenue to vendors as one of the challenges in implementing the program, and two of the three vendors agreed that this was a problem for them. One commented that their revenue was down 30% since the program began. The third vendor did not believe that cost was a barrier to implementation—noting that costs may be higher initially for the organization, but would balance out over time.

The three vendors all believed that their healthy vending business was increasing. Two noted that the increase started approximately two years ago, and was connected to the implementation of SB12 and SB19 in schools. One of these two vendors noted that while this type of program was increasing it was still a small portion of their total business. The third vendor noted that “not a day goes by” without a request for this kind of program.

It is worth noting that two of the vendors expressed very strong and somewhat negative opinions about the healthy vending movement. Both expressed the belief that vending machines were being unfairly blamed for childhood obesity—that simply changing food choices in a vending machine would do little to prevent obesity given that many children and adults can buy unhealthy food virtually anywhere. Both of these vendors noted the negative impact on revenue that healthy vending programs have for their companies. One vendor did note the need for a healthy vending program to be part of a larger, comprehensive wellness strategy for it to be effective, which is similar to the findings and experiences at the organizations implementing the programs.

Successes & Challenges

While many organizations initially implemented the Healthy Alternatives program, some deployed strategies that caused the program to be more successful than others. Some of the critical success factors that emerged in the evaluation are:

- Comprehensive healthy lifestyle strategy— Those companies that successfully implemented and maintained a healthy vending program, did so as part of a multi-pronged wellness approach. The vending program was not a stand-alone program, but instead was a single piece of a more comprehensive company-wide effort.
- Leadership involvement— Successful healthy vending programs typically had the full support of organizational leadership, either at a committee level, or from a single, passionate individual with organizational authority. Those programs that relied on the efforts of a single, perhaps middle-management level employee tended to taper off over time.
- Vendor relationships— Many vendors, at least initially, seem to have reservations about implementing a healthy vending program. The more successful healthy vending program engaged their vendors early in the planning and implementation process. Some organizations invested in educating the vendors about what constituted “healthy” snacks, others involved the vendor in a planning committee. In many cases, the organizations also continued monitoring the vendors and communicating regularly on the success of the program.

Conclusion

Overall, there appears to be momentum building towards structuring healthier workplaces. Employers and employees alike are concerned about creating healthier lifestyles, and taking steps in the workplace to stave off the onset of chronic conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

It is clear however, that simply instituting a healthy vending machine policy does not constitute a “healthy workplace”. Changing the snacks offered in a vending machine must be part of a larger workplace initiative—one that encompasses exercise promotion, policy around food served in the office at meetings, and educating employees about what constitutes healthy food choices. To simply change food in a vending machine is not only ineffective, it also runs the risk of upsetting employees.

Success Stories: Aetna, Health Care Partners, Kaiser Examples

Success Story: Aetna

With the IHA Healthy Alternatives program as impetus, Aetna implemented a healthy vending program within California, driven by their commitment to tackling obesity and providing healthy choices to its employees. With offices all over the country, Aetna initially targeted California as it believed organizations within the state would be more health conscious and thus more receptive to the program.

The program goal was to have at least 15% healthy choices in all vending machines, with some offices having a higher percentage depending on the demands of its employees. The guidelines were simple—each snack had to have 7 grams of fat or less, and 30% or less of its calories from fat. A committed and passionate Medical Director drove the effort, and the program was so successful that Aetna is now implementing the program nationwide.

Aetna is also expanding the breadth of its program, and in 2008 will be introducing a new program called Better Choice, Healthy Choice. Planned and coordinated in conjunction with the National Institute of Health, the program establishes more stringent guidelines for healthy snacks and excludes all candy and sweetened beverages from vending machines.

Success Story: Health Care Partners

Health Care Partners, a large multi-specialty medical group in Southern California, launched the Healthy Alternatives program in conjunction with an organization-wide food initiative aiming to promote healthier food choices to its employees. A major component of the company-wide food initiative was a food policy that specified the types of food that could be served at Health Care Partners (HCP). This included food at company meetings, at birthday parties and celebrations and food brought by pharmacy representatives, and the food sold in vending machines.

A passionate Regional Medical Director took personal ownership of the food initiative, including the Healthy Alternatives program. One of the first implementation steps was engaging the vendors, who had strong concerns about their ability to generate sufficient revenue through a healthy vending program. HCP was able to overcome this initial trepidation, convinced the vendor to lower their prices so as to make the healthy snacks more affordable for the employees, and ultimately converted the vendor from a skeptical business associate to an active and engaged initiative partner. To support the vendor, HCP worked on educating employees about the healthy vending program, with such efforts as creating fliers for vending machines that included information about the food in the machines. HCP also subsidized healthier items for the first year of the program, and even offered the healthy snacks for free for a limited period at the beginning of the program.

In conjunction with the Healthy Alternatives program, HCP sponsors numerous other activities that encouraged healthy eating and exercise, including:

- Walking and weight loss contests with incentives for employees
- Painting murals in stairwells to encourage employees to take the stairs
- Bringing in seasonal fruit twice per month and offering to employees for free along with nutritional information about the fruit
- Inviting a small, local farm to set up a fruit stand and sell fruit for a small price to employees

HCP recognizes that changing employees eating habits is a long-term proposition and that they must continually reinforce healthy eating messages in numerous ways. Given the diversity of their workforce HCP must also consider the contribution of culture to the ability of their employees to have healthy lifestyles. Despite these challenges, HCP is committed to supporting their employees' healthy choices and has leaders that are willing to invest in Healthy Alternatives and other healthy lifestyle programs.

Success Story: Kaiser Permanente— Healthy Picks Program

In 2005, the Kaiser Permanente (KP) Environmental Stewardship team developed its Comprehensive Food Policy outlining the guiding principles of all food-related work in the organization. An important first step in this work was participation in the Healthy Alternatives vending program, including a campaign to convert 50 percent of vending machine items to healthier fare through the KP Healthy Picks Program. Healthy Picks has since grown to encompass the promotion of healthy foods in vending machines and KP cafeterias, and also increased its support of environmentally sustainable food production.

To begin this process, KP developed its own Minimum Standards for Food and Beverage Selections to determine which items would qualify as healthier selections. Compared with the IHA minimum standards, KP standards are similar but slightly stricter. These standards also resemble the recently enacted nutrition legislation for California public schools, SB 12 for foods and SB 965 for beverages. KP then piloted three different percentages of these healthier items in six California facilities' vending machines. Based on the results of these pilots, the Food and Nutrition Services Directors agreed that implementing Healthy Picks items at the 50% level had the greatest likelihood of success throughout the regions. By 2007, over 1,000 vending machines throughout the KP regions had been converted to stock at least 50% Healthy Picks items. According to data from First Class Vending in the Southern California region, vending machine sales increased by 7.4% in the second quarter of 2006 after the region-wide implementation Healthy Picks, as compared to 2005.

After Healthy Picks had begun the conversion of vending machines throughout KP, the program took on the more complex challenges of the cafeterias. Rather than a simple percentage goal, the cafeteria required a set of guidelines tailored to the different meals and types of food service available in that setting. KP developed guidelines addressing the specific types of healthier foods that would be offered within several food service categories, such as breakfast, hot entrees, fresh fruits and vegetables, salad bars and snacks. By early 2007 all of the KP-owned facilities (located in the California, Northwest and Hawaii regions) had implemented Healthy Picks in their cafeterias.

New projects in the works for the Healthy Picks Program in 2007 and beyond include expansion of local sourcing projects in multiple regions, a menu labeling project in Northern California and the elimination of trans-fats throughout KP.

Attachment A

Healthy Alternatives Vending Program

Program Evaluation Survey (for companies who have implemented program)

A. General Information

1. Name of Organization
2. Interviewee Name
3. Title

B. Program Implementation

4. Did you implement the Healthy Alternatives program?
5. If no, why not?
6. If yes, but it has since been discontinued, why and when did you stop the program?
7. If the program is currently implemented, how many locations/sites are now operating the program?
8. Do you have plans to expand the program?
9. To what extent did you use the materials provided by IHA (talking points, brochures, etc)?
10. Did you encounter any barriers to implementation?

C. Vendors

11. What vendors do you use in the program?
12. Can you share contact information?
13. Did you change vendors as a result of implementing this program?
14. What is vendor response to the program?

D. Program Description

15. Describe your program, and how it is different from what was previously implemented.
16. What department within your company oversees the program?
17. What is employee response to the program?
18. Have you noticed increases/decreases in purchases from vending machines since implementing Healthy Alternatives?
19. What healthy food items appear to be the most/least popular with your employees?
20. Did you start any additional programs in conjunction with Healthy Alternatives?
21. In general, do you consider the program a success?

Attachment B

Healthy Alternatives Vending Program

Program Evaluation Survey (for vendors)

A. General Information

1. Name of Organization
2. Interviewee Name
3. Title

B. Program Information

4. Does your company offer vending programs with healthy food choices?
5. Describe your vending programs that offer these healthy choices.
6. Are the costs to the purchasing organization different than for other vending program?
7. How many locations/sites are now operating the program?
8. Has the number of participants increased/decreased over the past two years?
9. Do you have plans to expand the program?
10. Do you have any electronic tracking systems for volume, types of food, etc.?
11. Is there an increased demand from your customers for this kind of program?
12. Questions about specific employers:
 - a. Experience with those that implemented Healthy Alternatives
 - b. Others