

Hospitals Can Model Healthy Options Healthier Choices Needed to Reduce Obesity

Kansas, like other states, is dealing with an obesity epidemic. The obesity rate in Kansas has more than doubled over the last thirty years. In 1991, 13.1 percent of Kansas adults were obese (had a body mass index of 30 or higher). In 2022, that number has increased to more than 36 percent of adults in Kansas who are obese, higher than the national average of 33.9 percent. Almost 30 percent of Kansas youth age 10-17 years are overweight or obese. This epidemic has staggering consequences for the health care system: \$1.327 billion in Kansas medical expenditures are linked to obesity, of which 29 percent is paid by Medicare (\$286 million) and Medicaid (\$99 million).

“Education alone rarely results in behavior change. Approaches most likely to result in real health improvements are those that create healthier environments.”



Addressing the obesity epidemic requires a multi-faceted effort. Policy, systems and environmental (PSE) changes broadly affect the way people live and assist in creating frameworks where the easy, default choices are healthy, as opposed to unhealthy ones. For these reasons, experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommend PSE-based approaches for promoting healthy eating behaviors and reducing over consumption of food and beverages of low or poor nutritional quality.

Among the recommended strategies to change unhealthy behaviors are the following:

- Providing access to free, safe drinking water;
- Limiting access to sugary drinks;
- Promoting access to and consumption of healthy foods; and
- Using pricing, placement and other marketing strategies to make healthy food and beverages more affordable and convenient.

Public health experts recommend using PSE strategies across community settings, including worksites and health care facilities, as key strategies for reducing and preventing obesity.

Make Healthy Options Available at Work

The work environment influences employee beverage and food choices in conscious and unconscious ways. Most employees spend at least eight hours a day, five days a week, in the workplace and consume at least one meal, and often a snack or two, while at work. For employees who cannot go off-site during their shifts, their food or drink choices will be dictated by what they bring with them or what they can buy at their workplaces. Policies directing

what drinks or foods can be served during meetings or other work events also help shape dietary choices. Strong evidence supports the effectiveness of workplace obesity prevention and control programs that include improved access to healthy foods in vending machines and cafeterias.

Hospitals Positioned to Lead Efforts

The IOM notes that health care facilities are strong candidates to lead efforts to promote healthy food environments, and has called on them to provide models for healthy eating and active living worksite practices and programs. As the Kansas Hospital Association explains, “as major employers in the community and the primary source of health care in many communities, hospitals have the opportunity to establish strong community norms and influence the health decisions of the public.” Hospitals in Kansas and across the nation have taken up the challenge by working to implement policies and practices to promote consumption of healthy products within their facilities and to reduce consumption of sugary drinks and unhealthy foods.

Supporting health-promoting behaviors and choices aligns with hospitals’ missions to prevent and treat chronic diseases and other health problems. Many Kansas hospitals have identified obesity as a priority health need in their Community Health Needs Assessments. However, studies have shown that many health care settings provide easy access to unhealthy options, which can enhance the appeal of these unhealthy products. Beverage sales data show that some hospitals are contributing millions of empty calories to their communities through sugary beverage sales from their vending machines or cafeterias.

Healthier Choices Needed to Reduce Obesity

Many U.S. hospitals, including children’s hospitals, host fast-food franchises and fast-food menu offerings. One study reported that the existence of fast food within a hospital campus was associated with more positive perceptions of fast food (including healthiness) among parents visiting the hospital. Another study of children participating in a Healthy Eating, Active Communities program found that 79 percent of health care facilities had vending machines (with hospitals having the highest average number per facility compared to health departments and clinics), with pop and candy comprising the greatest percentage of products offered.

As hospitals work to address the obesity epidemic in their communities, they are making changes in their own food and beverage environments to improve the health of their own workforce and to become role models for other employers and health care providers.

Changes Create Opportunities, Challenges

Opportunities for promoting access to healthy foods and beverages exist in health care settings and other types of worksites. Within health care facilities, vending machines may be the only source of food or drink for staff – as well as for patients and visitors – when the cafeteria and other dining options are closed. Some worksites may not have a cafeteria, making the food in the vending machine even more important.

Health care facilities, like other worksites, can face challenges when implementing healthy food and beverage policies. Determining nutritional standards, dealing with vendors and educating staff about the changes to promote buy-in require time, planning and effective communication. Hospitals can lay the groundwork with area vendors on contract issues and on the selection of suppliers with more healthy products or recipes. Communication materials used to educate staff, patients and visitors about the changes and how they reflect the hospital’s commitment to health can be used by other employers making similar changes. Hospitals can provide examples of institutional policies and practices designed to support healthy eating behaviors. They also can offer insight about

how to respond to questions regarding limiting choices, potential economic impact and related issues that often come up when healthy options are phased in. Hospitals can share “best practices” and help their communities and other businesses navigate the challenges of PSE changes successfully.

Healthier Food/Beverage Policies Improve Worksite Wellness

Hospitals and their employees are very likely to benefit from PSE changes to improve nutrition and health. A 2010 study of 1.1 million hospital workers and their dependents found an 8.6 percent higher rate of illness than among the general U.S. workforce. Hospital workers and their families are more likely to suffer from chronic medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, congestive heart failure, HIV, hypertension, mental illness and obesity/overweight.

The study also found that health care costs for hospital employees are 10 percent higher than the average cost for U.S. workers. The study estimated that a hospital or health system with 16,000 employees would save about \$1.5 million per year in medical and pharmacy costs for each 1 percent reduction in health risk for its employees. While several factors – such as stress and long work shifts – contribute to the illness burden of the health care workforce, policies that promote nutritious food and beverage environments could improve health.

Hospitals Can Make a Difference

As employers and providers, hospitals have a significant investment in the health of their employees and patients. They also can be leaders in creating healthier communities by modeling PSE changes. Public health experts agree that one norm that must be changed is the over-consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages. Hospitals can help reduce chronic disease and premature death by leading local efforts to shift community norms to promote healthier behaviors, including choosing nutritious foods and beverages.

“Hospitals’ growing awareness and understanding of the challenges facing communities around promoting healthy eating behaviors have inspired many of them to make changes in their own food and beverage environments, to help lead the way for their communities.”

The Kansas Hospital Association and Healthworks have created a series of resources designed to inform and support efforts to promote healthy food and beverage environments in Kansas hospitals. The Public Health Law Center assisted in creating this document. These resources are funded in part by the Kansas Health Foundation. For more information, visit www.HealthyKansasHospitals.org.

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