

## Workplace Policies to Offer Nutritious Foods

*This paper is part of a series of nutrition policy profiles prepared by Prevention Institute for the Center for Health Improvement (CHI).*

### Background

It has long been demonstrated that the physical and social environment of the workplace influences health-related behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Eating is one behavior that is greatly influenced by the workplace. Work is where many people spend the majority of their weekday waking hours. At least one meal is consumed at work, and snacks are often a means to relieve pressure and take breaks throughout the workday. Food available in employee cafeterias, vending machines, and at work-sponsored events frequently determines what people eat throughout the day. Many times, food provided by the workplace is not highly nutritious or is high in fat or sugar; for example, snacks or meeting foods often include foods such as cookies, pastries, and candy, all potential sources of extra fat and calories.

The realities of the work environment can overpower the good intentions of workers to eat healthier. For example, according to a California study,<sup>2</sup> the number of California adults who believe that fruits and vegetables are foods that reduce cancer risks rose from 23 percent in 1989 to 50 percent in 1997, yet only one third of adults reported eating the recommended servings. The study also found that 59 percent of adults surveyed in 1997 cited “hard to get at work” as the most frequent barrier to eating fruits and vegetables.

### Policy

*Employers should implement workplace policies that require nutritious food options in employee cafeterias and at work-sponsored events.*

The majority of programs in the U.S. designed to improve workplace health have focused specifically on changing individual behavior without making much effort to make institutional changes in the work environment.<sup>3</sup> The implementation of policies that require nutritious food options at the workplace establish a healthy workplace environment and demonstrate employer commitment to employee health.

Waters Corporation, located in Milford, Massachusetts, is one example of a company that has made a commitment to providing healthy food options in its workplace cafeteria. The Waters in-house food service is run by Sodexho Marriott, a national corporation that provides food service to various institutions, including businesses, universities, and government departments. A few years ago, Waters executives requested that Sodexho Marriott begin offering at least one non- or low-fat or no-cholesterol entrée at every meal. In response to the request, Sodexho Marriott developed a “healthy choice bar” featured daily at breakfast and lunch. Waters also asked for healthy options in other areas of the cafeteria, and fresh fruit and steamed vegetables are now also offered daily (Matthew Rossi, Sodexho Marriott, personal communication, December 2000).

As a leading employer in the country, government has a particularly important role in promoting healthy eating at work. One example of a government agency that took a lead role is Contra Costa County in Northern California. In 1993, the County Board of Supervisors adopted the Contra Costa County Food Policy, a set of nutritional guidelines developed by the Food Policy subcommittee of the Contra Costa Food and Nutrition Policy Consortium. The policy requires that a healthy choice of refreshments consistent with U.S. dietary guidelines is offered at all county-sponsored functions at which meals or snacks are served. The policy also extends to county government vending machines, caterers, cafeterias, and county food assistance programs.<sup>4</sup>

## **Effectiveness**

As a result of the concerted effort made by Waters Corporation and Sodexo Marriott, their employees now have the choice of eating nutritious meals and snacks while at work. According to Sodexo Marriott records, on an average day, the healthy choice bar entrée is chosen by 5 to 10 percent of employees. The healthy choice bar has also proven beneficial for Sodexo Marriott, bringing in customers who typically would not eat cafeteria food because of its often high-fat and high-cholesterol content. Having healthy options in the cafeteria has helped raise patronage by 5 percent and cafeteria sales by 3 percent.

Preliminary results in Contra Costa County showed that 60 percent of offices reported that healthy foods were being offered at meetings. Of the remaining 40 percent, half indicated that food was seldom offered at meetings and that meetings were not frequent enough to make a solid observation. Informal evaluations of other parts of the policy indicated additional improvements, for example, the availability of healthier food choices and fruit juices in county vending machines.<sup>5</sup>

## **Contact**

Matthew Rossi  
Sodexo Marriott  
Tel: (508) 482-2612  
E-mail: [kmrossi@mediaone.net](mailto:kmrossi@mediaone.net)

## **Acknowledgments**

### Advisory Committee

Kate Clancy, Ph.D., Director of the Henry A. Wallace Center for Agriculture and Environmental Policy at WINROCK International, Rosslyn, VA

Andy Fisher, Executive Director, National Community Food Security Coalition, Venice, CA

Arnell Hinkle, RD, MPH, CHES, Executive Director, California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit), Berkeley, CA

Sheldon Margen, MD, Professor Emeritus, Public Health Nutrition, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA

Marion Nestle, MPH, Ph.D., Chair, Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, New York University, New York, NY

Margo Wootan, D.Sc., Director of Nutrition Policy, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Washington, DC

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<sup>1</sup> Stokols D, Pelletier KR, Fielding JE. The ecology of work and health: research and policy directions for the promotion of employee health. *Health Education Quarterly*. 1996;23:137-158.

<sup>2</sup> *California Dietary Practices Survey: Overall Trends in Healthy Eating Among Adults, 1989-1997, A Call to Action, Part 2*. Sacramento, Calif: California Dept of Health Services; 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Biener L, Glanz K, McLerran D, et al. Impact of the Working Well Trial on the worksite smoking and nutrition environment. *Health Education & Behavior*. 1999;26:478-494.

<sup>4</sup> Cortes F, Steeples M, Stone M. Promoting healthy eating: Contra Costa County's food policy [Notes from the Field]. *American Journal of Public Health*. 1995;85:1449-1450.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.