



Problem:

Obesity is the second leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Easy access to food sources that are high in sugar, calories, and sodium but low in nutritional value make it hard to consistently eat well. Low income urban neighborhoods, rural areas, and communities of color are all high need communities where it is especially challenging to access healthy food. Failing to win the battle against obesity could mean premature death and disability for an increasingly large segment of New York residents. Without strong action to reverse the obesity epidemic, children may face shorter life spans than their parents. It is crucial that public health interventions target the most vulnerable communities to increase access and availability of healthy food choices.

Intervention:

In 2013 the Department of Health (DOH) received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to work with local health, education, and community partners to implement food standards in worksites in New York State. Local contractors consisting of local health departments, rural health networks and educational institutions partnered with worksites, municipalities, hospitals, and community-based organizations to establish standards for foods purchased and/or served. To collect baseline and follow up information about the nutrition environment of sites, an assessment tool was developed through a combination of two CDC resources—the *Worksite Health Scorecard* and *Smart Food Choices: How to Implement Food Service Guidelines in Public Facilities*. Assessments captured information on the nutrition environment and where food is provided and informed action plans for each site. Local contractors provided technical assistance to partners on strategies for implementing best practices and comprehensive food and beverage standards, in alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, into multiple venues including cafeterias, cafes, vending machines, meetings and events. Strategies included working with partners to develop and implement food service guidelines and policies, to market and promote healthier items, and to improve the food environment by increasing access and placement of healthier foods and beverages in cafeterias vending machines, and providing access to fresh produce through various strategies.

585 worksites and community based organizations (CBOs) in high need communities assessed food service policies and practices with a reach of 770,000 people.

381 sites documented at least one improvement to their workplace food policies, practices and environments with an estimated reach of just under 500,000 people:

- 218 worksites reported at least one improvement to their food service guidelines
- 163 community-based organizations reported implementing at least one healthy eating practice, policy or strategy

Onsite access to farmers markets and fresh produce, and promotion of the benefits of healthy eating were most commonly implemented.

Impact:

From 2013-2018, food service policies and practices were assessed at a total of 585 worksites and community-based organizations in high need communities with an estimated potential reach of more than three quarters of a million people (770,000). 218 worksites and 163 community-based organizations documented at least one improvement to their workplace food policies, practices and environments with an estimated reach of just under a half a million people.

218 worksites and hospitals, reaching an estimated 76,000 employees, reported at least one improvement in their food service guidelines. More than half of these work sites partnered with farmers markets to increase access to fresh produce and a majority offered nutrition education supports through written and online communication, health coaching or educational workshops on nutrition. One-third of the worksites implemented healthy meeting guidelines and approximately one quarter adopted food purchasing policies that insure healthy choices in vending machines. Addressing employee awareness in concert with policy change, increases the likelihood that improvements in food service guidelines will influence employee food choices.

One grantee reported working directly with two county worksite wellness committees made *“the work visible and viable to local decision makers. In both counties we have strong support to implement healthy vending policies. Working with both worksite wellness committees is creating sustainable, environmental changes at the county municipal levels.”*

Beginning in 2015, the food standards initiative increased its visibility and potential reach by expanding to include a wide variety of community based organizations (CBOs).

163 CBOs reported implementing at least one healthy eating environmental, practice or policy strategy with a potential reach of

447,000 people. The two strategies most frequently implemented were onsite access to farmers markets and fresh produce and informational approaches. Local partners are continuing to work on food standards, healthy meeting policies, healthy vending and nutrition information posting at the remaining sites while continuing to recruit new sites as part a statewide initiative called “Creating Healthy Schools and Communities”.

The increase in obesity has slowed over the past five years, but obesity still affects 25.5% of the adult population in New York State.

NYSDOH uses multiple surveillance systems to monitor population health indicators. Data from the most recent Expanded Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey show that initiatives like this continue to be crucial to the health of New Yorkers, but there is still much work to be done! The increase in obesity appears to have slowed over the past five years and is below the national average but obesity still affects 25.5% of the adult population. Nearly a quarter of the adult population still report consuming regular soda or other sugar-sweetened beverages daily and the consumption of fruits and vegetables remains stubbornly low at 22.4%. Improved nutrition standards, polices and organizational practices at worksites and in public spaces where food is available to the public increases both awareness and access. Over time implementing food standards may help to lower the risk factors for chronic diseases associated with over consumption of unhealthy food.

