

Utah Department of Health Promotes Healthy Eating Options at Catered Events

The Utah Department of Health incorporates HHS and USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans in its workplace through a healthy food policy for catered events.

Over the past 20 years, rates of overweight and obesity in the United States have increased substantially. In 2012, nearly 57 percent of adults in Utah were classified as overweight, while 22.5 percent of adults were classified as obese.¹ In response to this epidemic, the Utah Department of Health's (UDOH) Bureau of Health Promotion (BHP) adopted a workplace policy in 2006 wherein food options at catered events must meet HHS and USDA's [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) (DGA). Key recommendations of DGA include increasing consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, while decreasing consumption of sodium, fat and saturated fat, trans fat, sugars, refined grains, and serving smaller portion sizes. To promote employees' nutritional knowledge while ensuring that meals served at agency-hosted events are healthy, UDOH staff now choose food for agency-hosted events based on training from registered dietitians. Staff support for the healthy food policy led to its agency-wide adoption in 2010.

Steps Taken

- UDOH is dedicated to providing a work environment that supports healthy lifestyles, including providing healthy food choices that support their efforts to promote the health and wellbeing of all Utahans.
- In 2004, BHP developed the healthy foods policy to set an example of healthy eating in the state. The policy ensures that foods and beverages provided at UDOH-sponsored meetings and catered events are healthy.
- BHP's director developed the policy based on DGA, and recruited internal staff with expertise in worksite wellness and nutrition, including dietitians, to assist with the policy's development and implementation. Department leadership, including the director of the Division of Disease Control and Prevention and the deputy director of UDOH, adopted the policy agency-wide in 2010.
- BHP scrutinized existing agency processes to identify an opportunity to integrate the healthy catered options policy. Because agency managers, administrative assistants, and bureau directors must sign off on meeting request forms prior to department meetings, this presented a timely opportunity to incorporate the new policy. The policy requires that these officials sign off on both the meeting request forms and healthy food policy forms concurrently. Registered dietitians provide training to individuals in charge of selecting and signing off on healthy food choices, and healthy food lists are also available for staff creating the menus for catered events.
- Although implementing the policy seemed simple, BHP faced several internal challenges. To start, the policy's adoption was stalled by skeptical employees. In response, the department shared positive experiences in training sessions to convey the importance of the policy and increase

- Although Utah is ranked as one of the healthiest states in the nation, individuals are not meeting the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption.
- In Utah, 34.9 percent of adults consume fruit less than once daily and 19.8 percent of adults consume vegetables less than once daily.²

employee acceptance. Additionally, the policy's language was difficult for individuals with no health or nutrition training to understand, so UDOH simplified it. Finally, many employees did not want richer foods, including desserts, to be eliminated, reasoning that since catered events occur infrequently, employees should be able to eat their foods of choice. As a compromise, the policy does not prohibit dessert, but instead recommends smaller portions and healthier options such as fresh fruit.

- Department leadership initially believed that the policy would be too expensive to implement due to the higher costs of more nutritious foods. However, caterers were willing to make healthy substitutions without charging more. The healthy foods policy also contains a provision for employees to request higher per diem rates if healthier options are more expensive than current meal rates.
- Another challenge for BHP was that caterers often had a difficult time following the department's dietary guidelines, as they were unable to provide information on the nutrient standards like percentage of calories from fat and sugar, or were unable to serve foods within those percentages. For example, many of the caterers' grain products might not be 100 percent whole grain, or prepared foods might have more sodium than recommended by DGA. In order to address these challenges, the policy was simplified to focus on food-based standards rather than nutrient-based standards.
- Utah's health insurer's worksite wellness program [Healthy Utah](#) has joined in the initiative and has shared the policy with other state and local agencies.

Results

- Although UDOH's healthy foods policy has not been formally evaluated, anecdotal evidence from internal and external participants suggests that the policy, which impacts an estimated 1,100 individuals, has had positive results: meeting participants have expressed gratitude that healthy options and sensible portions were available.

Lessons Learned

- It was more difficult than expected to illustrate the policy's benefits and convince leadership that it would not be burdensome or expensive to implement. Therefore, it is important to identify barriers to acceptance within agency leadership by conducting an assessment prior to policy implementation to identify attitudes regarding health-related food habits. In addition, if employees are not supportive of the policy, directors should identify staff concerns and provide education sessions to address them.
- The policy should be straightforward and easy for staff to implement. Originally, nutrient-based standards (i.e., measuring amounts of sodium, saturated fat, trans fat, sugars, and refined grains) were used to make menu selections at UDOH. By using food-based standards (i.e., measuring amounts of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins) greatly simplified the process for caterers while reducing the burden on employees who are trying to implement the policy.
- The process of creating a healthy options menu can be expedited by encouraging employees to mentor one another through informal networks. In addition, the [American Cancer Society Meeting Well](#) and the [National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity Healthy Meeting Toolkit](#) can assist state health agencies that aspire to implement similar policies.

State Story



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