

National Institutes of Health — Bethesda, M.D.

Background

Featuring five cafés and two coffee bars, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) serves approximately 4,500 meals each day at its Bethesda, Maryland campus. Contracted through Eurest, NIH cafés began implementing the Health and Sustainability Guidelines for Federal Concessions and Vending Operations in September 2014. Eurest Registered Dietitian, Beth Dorman, and her team first learned about the Guidelines through their employer and onsite dietitians at the NIH.

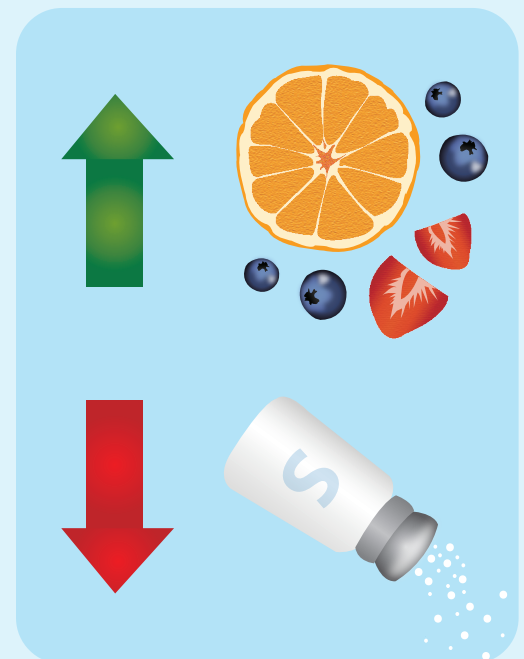
Goals

With a strong commitment to improving health, adopting the Health and Sustainability Guidelines for Federal Concessions and Vending Operations in NIH cafés was a natural fit. The nutrition team hoped that making these changes would help to educate the NIH's 20,000 employees about healthier options, and create an environment in which these options were readily available.

Implementation

Early on, the nutrition team worked to secure support from food service operators and NIH management. To help do this, they showed clips from the HBO documentary, “The Weight of the Nation” to educate Eurest stakeholders about the vast impact that dietary choices have on public health. Once support was secured, the team could focus its attention on carrying out these changes.

The team implemented the guidelines by adding healthier food items, introducing smaller portion sizes, developing product specifications for healthier food items, limiting the purchase and preparation of unhealthier items like fried foods, purchasing more low sodium products, and adding more fresh fruits and vegetables. They also began offering more lean meats, fewer items with added salt, and more non-fat/low-fat dairy items.



Promotion

To promote these healthier choices, the nutrition team created “Sensible Selection” meal spotlights. Each day, the “Sensible Selection” designated meal is highlighted with an icon, and bundled with healthier items like apples. Using social media, the team features the “Sensible Selection” meal so customers know which items are being offered that day. Signage has also been critical to educate customers about healthier choices, and to promote the “Sensible Selection.”

Challenges and Solutions

In the midst of their implementation efforts, the team did encounter a few challenges. One challenge involved removing certain items, due to their popularity with customers. To address this, the café has consolidated some of its unhealthy meals, and made them more difficult to access by only selling them in specific cafés.

Finding products to meet some of the guidelines has also been a challenge since vendors don't always offer products that meet them. Boxed cereals, for example, are too large and have too much sugar to be in compliance with the guidelines, while deli soups and sandwiches can quickly exceed sodium allotments. To address this, the team has worked diligently to identify nutritious replacements, such

as carrots and celery sticks instead of potato chips, or chicken sandwiches and veggie burgers instead of hamburgers. They've also changed some portion sizes. For example, they now serve half sandwiches to help keep sodium levels down.

Finally, the team has had to contend with cost and labor issues. While new recipes may meet the guidelines, the labor or preparation time they require, the cost of ingredients, or the culinary skills needed may make them impractical options.

The team has also tried to address each of these issues by ensuring there are a wide variety of items for patrons to choose from. They recognize that since they are servicing a wide variety of customers with different food preferences and dietary needs, diverse menus are key.

Keys to Success

Ultimately, the team considers implementation to be a success as café sales have increased overall. A key part of the success is attributed to having an onsite Registered Dietitian (RD) who could oversee the guidelines, and act as a point-of-contact.

Support from stakeholders was also essential. With all parties sharing the common goals of educating customers about better choices and improving nutri-

tion, the nutrition team was able to make changes in NIH cafés without push back.

Finally, promotion played a starring role in their implementation strategy. In addition to promoting café changes, the team also made sure to communicate their chief motivation behind making these changes – to improve the eating habits of NIH employees, who work so passionately to improve the health of others.