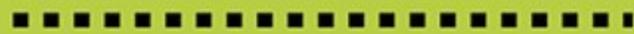




Building Momentum for Healthy Food Policy in Edmonton Recreation Centres



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POWER UP! Policy Stories

Recreation centres in the City of Edmonton (City), including leisure centres, arenas and swimming pools, receive over eight million visits per year (City of Edmonton, 2015). In an effort to increase the availability of healthy food options, in 2010 Edmonton City Council approved an operations directive to provide a minimum of 50% healthy choices in snack and vending machines in these settings (**Operational Guidelines**). This story explores the impetus for these Operational Guidelines and other efforts within the City to support healthier food environments in recreation centres.

An Inquiry of the Administration

In 2009, an Edmonton City Councillor noticed a misalignment between the City's mandate of supporting health and wellbeing and the types of food and beverages being offered to customers in recreation centres. Concerned, the councillor brought this issue to City Council for discussion. During this discussion, it was clear that council members shared their fellow councillor's concerns, with the conversation ultimately leading to an "inquiry of the administration." In the inquiry, council requested that a report be developed for the Municipal Community Service Committee outlining efforts to promote healthy eating in City recreation centres.

Gary Dewar, the Marketing and Sales Supervisor for the City's Community and Recreation Facilities Branch of the Citizens Service Department, played a key role in developing the Community Service Committee report. Having successfully implemented a *Milk 2 Go* vending program in 2008, Dewar was aware of the increasing public appetite for healthier choices and confident that the administration could work with stakeholders to improve the healthfulness of recreation centre offerings.



Terwillegan Community Centre, Edmonton

Following the inquiry from City Council, Dewar and his team engaged in a number of strategies to inform the Community Service Committee report. For example, they engaged in discussions with snack and beverage vending contractors to determine their ability and willingness to provide healthier choices. They also sought assistance from Alberta Health Services in using the *Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth* (ANGCY) to support healthy eating in Edmonton’s recreation centres (Alberta Health and Wellness, 2012). In addition, the City consulted with five other Canadian municipalities (i.e. Calgary, Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, and Winnipeg) to determine what steps, if any, were being taken by other jurisdictions to create healthier food environments in recreation centres.



Children Playing Hockey
Wikimedia Commons

Starting with the Guidelines

Through the stakeholder consultation process and the City’s experience with initiatives such as *Milk 2 Go*, it became clear that developing snack and vending guidelines would be a feasible first step in the development of a policy.

With the above in mind, the resulting Community Service Committee report included Operational Guidelines for healthy vending, which recommended the provision of at least 50% snack and beverage vending choices that fall into the “Choose Most Often” and “Choose Sometimes” categories as defined by the ANGCY. The report also recommended labelling healthier choices in snack and beverage vending machines. The report and guidelines were finalized in 2010 and a supportive City Council approved the documents soon after.

We connected with Alberta Health Services and with our vending partners. That’s where the approved motion came about.

Gary Dewar
City of Edmonton

Working with Partners to Make Change

When City Council approved the report in 2010, the City was still under existing vending agreements. At that time, existing contracts did not specify the provision of healthy choices, which was a potential barrier to implementing changes to vending machine offerings based on the Operational Guidelines. Nevertheless, vendors agreed to work with the City to modify their product offerings soon after the guidelines were approved, and vending machine offerings were adjusted almost immediately.

Looking back, a number of factors facilitated the smooth transition. First, the City consulted vendors early on in the change process, so vending partners were able to anticipate the change. Further, many of the vendors had already built capacity to provide healthy food and beverages in vending machines through their work with school boards across the province.



Terwillegar Community Centre

Since the Operational Guidelines were implemented in 2010, the provision of a minimum of 50% healthy choices has been incorporated into select Requests for Proposals (RFPs). The City has also entered into new agreements with vending contractors that stipulate the provision of a minimum of 50% healthy choices.

When you're working with the right partners, it makes one's job a whole lot easier.

*Gary Dewar
City of Edmonton*

Enforcement and Monitoring

Currently, City recreation centres have a contract administration team that works to ensure vendors are following their contracts. Following development of the Operational Guidelines, the scope of this team's work has expanded to include monitoring of 50% healthy options in vending machines. While the City ensures 50% healthy food options are provided, Gary Dewar is careful to point out that this does not necessarily equate to 50% sales of healthy choices. However, sales of all items are monitored through regular vendor reports and these reports consistently indicate that, as more healthy choices have been introduced into the vending program, sales have been maintained and the proportionate share of sales derived through healthy choices has increased.

Mounting Efforts: Building Momentum for Policy

Since the release of the Operational Guidelines, there have been additional efforts to build healthier food environments in City recreation centres. For example, in 2012 the City launched *Fresh: Edmonton's Food and Urban Agriculture Strategy* (City of Edmonton, 2012). The implementation of *Fresh* throughout the City has resulted in a focus on “sustainable, fresh, and healthy” as criteria for corporate procurement. These criteria are now required to be included in the concession tender process for City recreation centres. In addition to being assessed according to factors such as reputation, financial viability, and quality of products and services, potential concession operators are also assessed based on their plan to support *Fresh*. This, in turn, has resulted in a number of successful partnerships between the City and local businesses, including a partnership with Moo's Healthy Food Fast (See Box 1).

In addition, the City has collaborated with University of Alberta researchers to promote healthy food environments in recreation centres (Olstad et al., 2014; Olstad et al., 2015). This research has provided key learnings for the City in terms of understanding the impact of healthy food offerings on sales and the use of evidence-based strategies, such as traffic light labelling and promotional pricing, to encourage the selection and sale of healthier options.

Moving forward, the momentum generated through the above efforts is likely to encourage broader changes within City recreation centres. For example, while the City does not have a municipal-wide healthy food and beverage policy for recreation centres, Dewar anticipates that one will be developed within the next five years, which will be more restrictive than the current Operational Guidelines. In planning for such policy changes, the City intends to stipulate that vendors are required to follow any policies implemented during their contract period in future vending and concession contracts.

Box 1: Moo's Healthy Food Fast

Moo's Healthy Food Fast (Moo's) is a locally owned and operated business focused on providing healthy food in a number of private and public recreation centres throughout the City of Edmonton. They have taken steps to offer a healthier menu at Kinsmen Sports Centre since their successful concession bid in 2011. The franchise also worked with the City to pilot and subsequently establish a regular seasonal kiosk featuring healthy drinks and snacks at Queen Elizabeth Pool. Moo's creation of healthier food environments at these two City recreation centres has resulted in more recent successful bids to provide concession services at Mill Woods Recreation Centre, Hawrelak Park, and select City arenas.

Overcoming Challenges and Moving Forward

Despite ongoing efforts and a number of successes along the way, Gary Dewar reiterates the challenge of facility funding models and the need to be strategic when moving forward with development of healthy food policy. Customer expectations have demonstrated to be both a support and a barrier to creating healthier food environments in City facilities. While a growing number of customers not only want, but are advocating for healthier choices, another faction of the population using City facilities are more resistant to change. Further, within City recreation centres, there is recognition that change takes time and that creating healthier food environments can be an arduous process. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the role of corporate commitment, leadership from management, and the involvement of diverse stakeholders (e.g. academic, health, recreation, private sector) in fostering successful policy change.



City of Edmonton, Wikimedia

Key Lessons



- ◆ **Identify champions.** High-level champions (e.g. municipal councillors) and political will are integral to moving policy change forward.
- ◆ **Engaging key stakeholders.** Engage stakeholders, such as vendors, early on. Developing and maintaining strong relationships with partners is essential to success and the achievement of common goals.
- ◆ **Learn from previous policy efforts.** Build on previous policy efforts and successes, such as providing healthier vending in school environments, to expedite the policy change process.
- ◆ **Change takes time.** Recognize that change is a continuous process and will not happen overnight.
- ◆ **Celebrate small wins.** It is important to celebrate successes and use small wins as a foundation to support policy change.



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For more information on Edmonton's Recreation Centres, please visit: https://www.edmonton.ca/activities_parks_recreation/recreation-leisure-centres-pools.aspx.

For more information on Moo's Healthy Food Fast, please visit: <http://mooshealthyfoodfast.com/>.

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