Skyline Terrace is one of numerous Austin properties owned by the non-profit Foundation Communities, which offers low-cost housing with numerous on-site social service programs, including health and wellness initiatives. Many Skyline Terrace residents suffer from diabetes, obesity and other chronic conditions that could be made worse by consuming the traditional junk food, snacks and drinks offered in the vending machine that once sat in the lobby of their apartment building. The American Heart Association (AHA)’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program, through its work with Austin Public Health, partnered with Foundation Communities to help Skyline Terrace swap out its vending machine. In its place went one serviced by a vendor that specializes in healthier food and drink options. The alarming rise of obesity, along with other health problems, is related in large part to poor food choices. One way to improve such decisions is to increase consumer access to healthier food options where people live and play. A healthy vending policy can play a big role in this effort.

The Challenge
Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the country, and Austin, Texas has not escaped this trend: 57 percent of the residents in Travis County, of which Austin is the seat, are either overweight or obese. The rates climb even higher for African Americans (75%) and Hispanics (66%) populations.

Having healthy food widely available is an important part of making smart nutritional choices, particularly when it comes to buying from vending machines. Poor diets can contribute to obesity, as well as diabetes, heart disease and other chronic health problems. This is both a public health and economic concern. Texas businesses spend about $9.5 billion annually on obesity-related costs linked to health care and absenteeism, a figure that will rise to $32.5 billion by 2030, according to the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

“Adopting healthier vending standards takes us one step closer to achieving our mission of creating a culture of health, promote healthcare access and overall well-being, and address health disparities.”

— Andrea Albalawi, director of health initiatives for Foundation Communities

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The Foundation Communities, a local nonprofit that oversees a network of affordable housing units throughout Austin, recently swapped out the vending machine at one of its facilities, Skyline Terrace. Through its partnership with the city of Austin’s obesity prevention coordinator, the AHA worked with Skyline Terrace to review various national healthy vending guidelines and find a new company that specializes in selling healthier, more nutritious food. Foundation Communities agreed to standards that meet or exceed recommendations by the American Heart Association.

The new vendor brought in a machine now filled with variety of snacks lower in sodium, sugar, calories and saturated fat. The machine also offers residents various sparkling water and zero-calorie drinks instead of traditional sodas and other beverages loaded with sugar. In fact, the machine is 100% free from sugary drinks.

Sustaining Success
Skyline Terrace is one of 19 low-cost housing communities throughout Austin owned and operated by Foundation Communities. The success of the new healthy vending policy relied upon the collaboration between the AHA, the city of Austin’s public health department, and the health staff at Foundation Communities, which expects to expand its work to other sites it runs. “We plan to expand our Healthy Vending Machine Initiative to all our Foundation Communities’ properties,” said Andrea Albalawi, the organization’s director of health initiatives.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The new vending machine policy implemented at Skyline Terrace led to both a systems and environmental change. The consumer education efforts and heightened awareness among residents about making healthier snacking choices represents an environment change. Changing vendors and adopting healthier vending standards is a system based approach. The nutritional guidelines for vending products aligns with AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines.

Results
Although initially skeptical about the new vending machine and the different array of snacks and drinks it offered, Skyline Terrance residents quickly warmed up quickly to the options. A taste test allowed residents to sample some of the healthier products available and win over new customers, particularly those with dietary restrictions or individuals living with diabetes, high blood pressure and other health conditions.

While the building’s old machine rarely got used, the new one has become quite popular. The healthier snacks and drinks it offers sell out quickly, and the machine frequently needs to be restocked.

Get Involved
Healthy vending policies can become a reality anywhere people live, work or play. To learn how to adopt such a plan, the AHA offers a Healthy Food and Beverage Toolkit that provides practical steps and suggestions for improving the food environment and promoting a culture of health.

The AHA’s Healthy Food and Beverage Toolkit offers specific guidance and nutrition standards for snacks and meals. There are different versions available, including one tailored for community and organization members, as well as one customized for employers and the work place.