SUCCESS STORY: Creating a Culture of Health at Care New England

On Monday morning, Judy Sheehan MSN, RN, heads to work as the Director of Nursing Education at Butler Hospital in Providence. She parks, walks to the building and decides to take the stairs instead of the elevator to her floor. To fuel her busy day, Judy walks to the cafeteria and selects a healthy breakfast option and a bottle of water. Because of Care New England’s wellness program which started in 2001, it’s easy for employees like Judy to make the healthy choice at work.

Earlier this year, Care New England started working with the American Heart Association (AHA) to further improve their employees’ access to healthy foods and beverages. “Our goal is to make the healthy choice the easy choice,” said Jessica Granatiero, Chair of the American Heart Association’s RI Board of Directors. “Making healthy changes in the workplace, where many adults spend much of their day, is an important way to help people be healthier. It also helps cultivate social norms that foster sustainable healthy choices and behaviors.”

An estimated 20 to 30 percent of companies’ annual healthcare costs are spent on employees with 10 modifiable risk factors. These include the seven risk factors that make up the American Heart Association’s Life’s Simple 7: cigarette smoking, obesity, hypertension, high cholesterol, physical inactivity, poor diet and diabetes. The American Heart Association invites other organizations to assess their worksite environment to improve their employee’s overall health.

Under a CDC grant focused on Providence, AHA Regional Campaign Manager, Candace Pierce, provided recommendations on effective ways to develop and implement healthy food policies, including how to gain employee buy-in. In order to gain a better understanding of the foods and beverages sold, AHA has trained college interns who can survey foods sold through vending machines and cafeterias.

The American Heart Association evaluated vending machines and cafeterias at Butler and Women and Infants Hospitals. The majority of foods and beverages sold through the vending machines qualified as unhealthy and this information, as well as recommended policy changes, were presented to the CNE Employee Wellness Committee. As a result, CNE implemented a hospital-wide policy placing all vending machines under one contract and requiring that the contractor follow AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines.

Delmonico recently had a student survey the vending machines and cafeterias at Care New England’s Butler and Women and Infants Hospitals. “I have to give them a lot of credit. They’ve already done a lot to increase healthy choices in the cafeterias,” Pierce said. “The biggest opportunity for change is in the vending machines. We would suggest that they increase the amount of non-sugary beverages and healthy snacks, such as baked chips or nuts.”

As part of the AHA’s mission to build healthier lives, free from cardiovascular diseases and stroke, the association is working with hospitals and worksites in Rhode Island to increase healthy foods and beverages sold and served to employees and the general public. AHA’s downloadable Healthy Food and Beverage toolkit provides information on how companies can create a healthier environment, including passage of healthy meeting policies and increasing healthy food and beverage options served through vending machines or cafeterias.

“An increasing number of companies are focusing on how they can help their employees stay healthy, while also limiting health care costs. That’s why we are pleased to work with the American Heart Association on this initiative,” said Domenic Delmonico, Executive Director, Integra Community Care Network, an Accountable Care Organization.