

Healthier Vending at Aspire, Inc.

Summary

Aspire, Inc. is a non-profit agency in Aberdeen, SD that assists people with developmental disabilities. Finding ways to provide education on healthy lifestyle choices can present many challenges. An increase in obesity, decline in physical activity and the need for better education on food choices and portions were noted – not only for the people Aspire supports, but also the staff preparing the food and assisting with grocery shopping.

In order to work toward promoting a healthier lifestyle, Aspire started to implement many changes, including transitioning to the new school lunch standards, updating menus for supervised locations, providing more opportunities for activity and initiating “Fit Club,” which consisted of monthly meetings that provided education from a Registered Dietician and a healthy snack prepared by the agency nurse. In September 2014, Aspire was given the opportunity to participate in the SD Healthier Vending and Snack Bar Pilot Program with the Department of Health.

Challenge

Initial barriers consisted of determining how Munch Code guidelines would coexist with the School Lunch Standards. Some of the foods that were considered yellow for the Munch Code were approved for school lunch vending, which was surprising as most of their items are more comparable to green. The vending in the cafeteria required the School Lunch Standards; however; the vending in the staff break room did not. Convincing staff to let go of their comfort foods would be the next challenge. The staff was open to healthier choices, but did not want to replace all of the items. Upon review of the staff vending machine, there was an embarrassing amount of high fat/calorie food choices– the worst being a two-pack of cookies with a total of 700 calories and 900 mg of sodium. That item was immediately removed.

Other barriers encountered included difficulty finding foods that met the guidelines that were of interest to people and that were felt to be decent portion sizes. Getting approved vending items from the distributor also proved to be challenging. Aspire received a list of USDA school-approved snacks and healthier options from the distributor but it was limited. For example, the list was three pages long, but it included many multiples of the same items, just different flavors (i.e., chips and Nutrigrain bars). Aspire was also limited on beverage choices due to having an older machine that did not accommodate the size of bottles for some items on the list. They did not hear back from the distributor after providing the list compiled by the Department of Health on many approved items that were available at Walmart. The distributor was going to review the items and see what they could provide.

Solution

Despite the challenges, Aspire kept moving forward and was able to make some healthier changes to the vending machines. The vendor worked with Aspire to get food items they wanted and provided samples to do a group taste test. Some even preferred the taste of the healthier items over the less healthy ones. The staff vending machine went from having only four green and yellow items to 18 green and yellow items.



Results & Successes

Overall, the changes Aspire has made toward promoting healthier lifestyles are all beneficial and positive. They have seen a decline in weight for some people, staff members have prioritized being active when assisting people, portions are monitored better, and meetings and gatherings at work consist of healthier food choices.

According to Aspire's sales data, the changes have not had any negative effects. September and October 2015 had a larger amount of sales than previous months. Looking ahead, Aspire hopes to better gather and utilize sales data to get a clearer picture of what items are being sold as they cannot fully differentiate between green and red items available in the staff vending machine.

Aspire has a Wellness Committee that meets monthly and works toward promoting optimal health for staff, the people they assist and the community. This committee also maintains and promotes the healthy vending policy and procedures. The long-term goal is to continue educating, providing healthier choices and encouraging opportunities for physical activity.

Lessons Learned

The pilot project was a great learning experience for all entities involved. Aspire recommends getting vending distributors on board right away to allow for smoother transition. Having the calories displayed when trying to make healthy choices is a great idea; however, if vendors replace items, the new item may not have the same amount of calories or color code – so a commitment would be required from the vendor as well.

Participating in the pilot program benefited Aspire's agency by challenging them to look closer at how things could be improved. It prompted them to revisit their Wellness Policy, refocus on Aspire's goals and collaborate with other community resources to help carry out goals and build lasting working relationships.



Resources

www.aspiresd.org
www.munchcode.com
www.healthysd.gov
www.goodandhealthysd.org

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