



Boston Hospitals Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Learning Network

Boston Public Health Commission Health Care Without Harm



Background

Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are a leading source of empty calories in the typical American diet. There is accumulating evidence that SSB consumption contributes to obesity, heart disease, and hypertension.

As part of Boston's Obesity Prevention Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) Initiative funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) undertook a comprehensive community effort to raise awareness about SSB consumption and to increase consumption of water, particularly tap water.

Hospitals are typically the leading health care organization in a community and are seen as leaders in health issues more generally. In Boston, hospitals are also the largest employment sector. For these reasons, BPHC identified hospitals as key partners in our SSB initiative. Our goal was for hospitals to develop and begin to implement strategies to decrease access to and consumption of SSBs by early 2012.

Methods

In late 2010, BPHC convened a Learning Network of Boston teaching hospitals to share strategies for policy and practice changes that would reduce SSB consumption among staff, patients, and visitors. BPHC contracted with Health Care Without Harm to provide technical assistance to hospitals on making changes. American Heart Association also provided technical support.

Hospital chief executive officers were invited to participate by letter and through a presentation at the Boston Consortium of Teaching Hospitals. Contacts were also made within hospital community benefits, clinical, and community health departments to raise awareness of the initiative.

Each participating hospital was asked to: 1) designate a "champion" within the hospital; 2) convene a cross-departmental internal team; 3) attend bi-monthly Learning Network meetings; 4) develop a workplan that included some policy/practice targets; and 5) conduct a baseline and follow-up assessment of their SSB and water availability, policies, and practices.

Learning Network meetings were held approximately bi-monthly over 14 months. Each meeting included sharing of current practices, successes, and challenges. Additionally, external presenters provided information and perspective on how other hospitals nationally had instituted changes and legal/contractual issues in dealing with vending and food service changes. Having different hospitals host meetings at their sites provided a unique opportunity to showcase progress at different facilities.

A variety of different hospital department representatives participated in the Learning Network over time; these included Food Services, Operations, Human Resources, Community Medicine, Nursing, Community Benefits, and Sustainability Initiatives.

BPHC developed and offered a Healthy Beverages Toolkit (available at www.bphc.org/healthybeverages) that includes "traffic light signage" identifying Red (full sugar) Yellow (low sugar) and Green (healthy) beverages. A registered dietitian from Health Care Without Harm also worked with individual hospitals.

Results

Ten (10) Boston teaching hospitals participated in bi-monthly meetings of the Learning Network over approximately 18 months. By early 2012, all hospitals made a public commitment to change. These commitments were highlighted at a press conference led by Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino and American Heart Association Chief Executive Officer Nancy Brown.

Seven (7) hospitals made policy, systems and/or environmental changes, while the others were still in planning mode for future changes. Of these seven, key changes included:

- Carney Hospital banned SSBs in April 2011 (except for retail concession in lobby)
- Eight (8) hospitals used Traffic Light or other color-coded signage/labeling
- Five (5) made retail product mix changes to decrease the proportion of Red (full sugar) beverages
- Four (5) made pricing changes that increased the price differential for Red beverages over Yellow and/or Green ones
- Five (5) changed catering menus to eliminate SSBs as an option and/or to promote water
- Two (2) eliminated SSBs from patient tray service

A full description of hospital changes is available at www.bphc.org/healthybeverages



Participating Hospitals

- Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center
- Boston Children's Hospital
- Boston Medical Center
- Brigham and Women's Hospital
- Carney Hospital
- Dana Farber Cancer Institute
- Faulkner Hospital
- Massachusetts General Hospital
- St. Elizabeth's Medical Center
- Tufts Medical Center

Conclusion and Discussion

The Hospital SSB Learning Network was an effective vehicle to initiate sector-wide changes in beverage offerings at major Boston health care institutions. Changes included settings utilized by patients, staff, and visitors. The range of changes included many that prompt customers to make healthier choices (e.g., signage, placement options, color coding of beverage choices) while still making full sugar-beverages available for those who choose them.

To our knowledge, the Boston Hospitals SSB Learning Network was the first community-wide effort to address SSBs in health care organizations in the nation. Since 2012, additional initiatives have started, several of which include state hospital associations. Continued efforts to create healthy beverage environments in hospitals can be the leading edge of community-based campaigns for reduced SSB consumption.



On February 17, 2012, Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, American Heart Association Chief Executive Officer Nancy Brown, and Healthcare Without Harm President Gary Cohen joined ten Boston hospitals to announce significant progress in efforts to reduce the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages like soda, sports drinks, and energy drinks in hospitals.

