

Dayton Children's Hospital

A children's hospital tackles sugary drinks head-on

Timeline

PRE-2012

The mindset at Dayton Children's Hospital was "give the people what they love," regardless of how healthy it was. For a time, Dayton Children's was the biggest Pepsi account in the city of Dayton, and Pepsi's biggest slushy account in the U.S. During this time, a small group of employees met to discuss their profession's response to the childhood overweight and obesity epidemic. They grew into a much larger multi-disciplinary team from across the hospital, including outpatient and inpatient nurses, social workers, psychologists, physicians, dietitians and employees in electronic medical records.

2012

[New President and CEO Deborah Feldman](#) visited the cafeteria on her first day and noted: "The only healthy thing in this place is the salad bar, and at the end of the salad bar is cheesy bacon potato soup." Feldman started thinking about ways to improve the food options offered by the hospital. Her passion was born of the desire – as the only hospital dedicated to the health of children in the area – to lead by example.

2012

CEO Feldman invited the Director of Clinical Nutrition, the Corporate Director of Dietetics Nutrition and Environmental Sciences, and a lead physician to the Children's Hospital Association's "Boot Camp for a Healthy Hospital." There, the team learned about a self-assessment tool through Prevention Partners that helped Dayton Children's assess their overall culture of wellness. They scored four Fs and a D on one Prevention Partners assessment tool.

2013

Given Dayton's poor performance on the wellness assessment, the team recognized that changing their wellness culture would need to be a large-scale effort. Their mission was to explore how best to address the issue of health and wellness among staff, patients, and the community. Their conversations led to the Healthy Way Initiative, which comprises four main arms:

- Hospital nutrition
- Employee well-being
- Education and advocacy
- Intervention and treatment

"It started with one small group and grew as people were invited into the conversation."

Rachel Riddiford, Director of Clinical Nutrition

MAY 2014

As part of the Healthy Way Initiative, the hospital [stopped selling sugar-sweetened beverages \(SSBs\)](#) in the cafeteria, gift shop, vending machines, patient room service and on-site catering, although employees/patients can still bring SSBs in from home. Importantly, SSBs are available for patients who need high-calorie diets, post-surgery patients, or other times when the provider writes an order. Flavored milk is also allowed.

Members of the Healthy Way Initiative team were in charge of specific responsibilities in regard to the roll-out: Dietitians provided education and support; the dietetics and nutrition director helped execute and share the message with the staff directly impacted by the policy; the marketing department distributed the message more broadly to all staff, patients, and the community; and the leadership team helped reinforce the message and addressed complaints.

2014-16

A planned communication response (including an article in the organizational newsletter, an educational display in the cafeteria, and focus groups with employees to help identify groups in need of re-education or training) followed the initial implementation. An [FAQ](#) on the website is available to answer questions. Dayton Children's retook the Prevention Partners assessment, earning straight As. Interestingly, at a recent leadership meeting, an outside vendor mistakenly provided SSBs, but many were left untouched with participants instead preferring water. "That wouldn't have been the case six years ago. Maybe we've changed some behaviors," said Rachel Riddiford, the Director of Clinical Nutrition.

HOSPITAL STATS

SSB-free since 2014

CAMPUSES 2, as well as off-site locations for urgent care, rehab, labs, etc.

FOOD SERVICE 1 cafeteria, 1 café

EMPLOYEES 2,400+ total, including 400+ physicians/residents

BEDS 155

WEBSITE childrensdayton.org

Challenges

The move to remove SSBs from Dayton Children's was not without hurdles, which were focused on both the patient experience and the day-to-day satisfaction of employees who rely on the hospital cafeteria and vending machines. These included:

- **Concern for the patient experience:** Like many businesses, hospitals are driven by the patient (customer) experience. The role of sugary beverages in obesity was clear, however, and CEO Feldman was willing to deal with pushback to make a positive change.
- **Attitudes about personal choice:** Some of the strongest negative feedback came from those who insisted that the decision of what to eat is a personal right and that removing SSBs is an infringement on that right. Ultimately, Dayton responded to these concerns by reiterating their commitment to children's health, and emphasizing individuals' right to choose (while not profiting from that choice).
- **Concerns about artificial sweeteners:** Dayton Children's continues to offer artificially sweetened beverages and will sometimes get pushback from parents and others who are concerned about the cancer risk from artificial sweeteners. To date, they have been responding to these concerns by pointing out that the science does not show negative health impacts of those sweeteners, while the literature is clear about the role SSBs play in obesity and other chronic diseases and health effects.
- **Concerns about decreased revenue:** In fact, vending revenue did decrease by 70%, and although it's not back to pre-policy levels, sales continue to creep back up. People are buying more water than before (sales are up 400 percent), in part because Dayton Children's decreased water's price to make it more desirable. They continue to push their beverage provider to offer more sugar-free drinks besides diet sodas.

“

If you go into this...thinking this is going to be easy and not an event, I think you're setting yourself up for failure because if people start screaming, then [management] will run to the exit. It takes people who want to lead.

*Jeff Delahunt, Corporate Director of Dietetics
Nutrition & Environmental Sciences*

Lessons Learned

Dayton Children's learned two primary lessons from the experience of going SSB free:

1

Get buy-in from the top

Having a collaborative CEO who believes in the SSB-free initiative and refuses to back down will make the process easier, especially in a place (like Dayton) with less progressive opinions about food and considerable problems with obesity. The CEO needs to be willing to deal with push-back, especially in regard to lost revenue from the sale of SSBs.

“

The difficulty is directly related to attitudes in the area. ... We are in the most obese county in one of the most obese states in the US. ... Here [going SSB-free] is a huge deal. You have to have CEO buy-in because they have to tell the CFO to deal with less vending revenue.

*Jeff Delahunt, Corporate Director of Dietetics
Nutrition & Environmental Sciences*

2

Messaging is key

Lean heavily on the marketing department to distribute positive, simple, non-threatening messaging that outlines why health institutions shouldn't profit from the sale of sugary drinks, which have been shown to contribute significantly to obesity, as well as other chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes and heart disease. While sugary drinks are not directly linked to cancer risk, they contribute to obesity, which in turn increases the risk of the disease. Dayton points to one example that was useful: They placed stickers on the soft drink machines to briefly explain why the decision was made.