

Park Nicollet Health Services

The decision to go sugar-sweetened beverage-free started from the ground up

Timeline

- 2013** On January 1, Park Nicollet finalized its merger with [HealthPartners](#), a nonprofit, integrated health care system in Minnesota.
- 2013** The push to remove SSBs from Park Nicollet Health Services facilities began as a grassroots effort by one physician passionate about nutrition. Gathering fellow physicians, nurses, dietitians and others interested in nutrition, this doctor organized meetings and conversations about how to move this policy forward. The employee-led group applied for and won a grant from the [Center for Prevention](#) at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota to help further fund their nutritional goals
- 2013** In August of 2013, Park Nicollet used the Center for Prevention grant money to hire a program manager dedicated to making overall nutrition a focus for the health care organization. Led by that program manager, more than 100 Park Nicollet team members and even some patients joined forces to create the Better Eating Collaborative, a group dedicated to inspiring patients, team members and the community to embrace better eating. This group spearheaded the charge to stop the sale of SSBs throughout the Park Nicollet organization, which at the time included one hospital and roughly 20 clinics.

Park Nicollet phased out the majority of its SSBs, reaching 80% Better-for-You beverages (i.e., beverages without added sugar). Because Park Nicollet’s food services are run internally (not by an outside vendor), the partial removal of SSBs was relatively smooth.
- 2014** Park Nicollet’s grassroots effort paid off: In the spring of 2015, the Better Eating Collaborative received approval from leadership to go 100% SSB-free.
- 2015** In June, a public announcement was made that Park Nicollet Health Services would be 100% SSB-free as of January 1, 2016. The Better Eating Collaborative spent the rest of 2015 educating employees and the public about the reasons behind the change and what the change would mean.
- 2016** Park Nicollet went 100 percent SSB-free on January 1. Employees and guests are still allowed to consume SSBs if they bring them in from home. At the same time, the food services department began promoting the salad bar and vegetables as good choices, and less healthy items (e.g., doughnuts and candy bars) were moved away from point-of-purchase shelves into less prominent locations.
- TODAY** Conversations about health and wellness continue. Park Nicollet plans to remove the deep fat fryers in its cafeteria when the space is remodeled. HealthPartners more broadly continues to move toward the full elimination of SSBs.

HOSPITAL STATS

SSB-free since 2016

Park Nicollet Health Services is part of HealthPartners, a non-profit, integrated health care system in Minnesota.

LOCATIONS 29 in Minneapolis-St. Paul, including primary and specialty care clinics and hospitals

FOOD SERVICE 2 cafeterias, 1 café, and 2 coffee shops all run internally, plus 1 contracted independent café.

EMPLOYEES about 8,000

BEDS 426 (at Methodist Hospital)

WEBSITE parknicollet.com

“
We’re not a gas station. We’re a healthcare organization.”

Gina Houmann, Program Manager

Challenges

Incremental implementation made Park Nicollet’s path to elimination easier, but it was not without hurdles:

- **Concerns about loss of revenue:** Soft drink sales are an easy source of revenue for health care organizations, and some people in leadership voiced strong reservations about the financial repercussions of removing SSBs. And initially, Park Nicollet did see lower sales numbers after implementation. Happily though, sales rebounded and eventually surpassed former figures because of the popularity of new beverage options offered in place of SSBs. Also, diet sodas remained available, and Diet Coke had always been the biggest seller.
- **A lack of non-SSB options:** Roughly five years ago, when Park Nicollet began its push to go SSB-free, the number of non-SSB options was quite limited. As a result, it was difficult to keep the vending machines stocked. Today though, thanks to the increase in popularity of sparkling waters and other sugar-free drinks, there are far more choices.

Lessons Learned

Park Nicollet learned three primary lessons from the experience of going SSB free.

1 Don't rip off the band-aid

Park Nicollet attributes the relative ease of its transition to the fact that SSBs were phased out, not removed all at once. By going 80% SSB-free two years before they removed all SSBs, proponents of the change were able to relay their message of health and get people used to the idea before it was fully in place. The main message: “We’re not taking away your choice. We’re doing this because we’re a healthcare organization and we need to act like one,” said Gina Houmann, program manager. This slower roll-out also meant the dip in beverage sales was less severe.

2 Promote open communication

“The process can seem very daunting,” Houmann said. “But it wasn’t that hard of a change to make when you’re having the right conversations.” Before implementing an SSB-free policy, Park Nicollet had numerous internal discussions with members from different departments explaining the reason behind the change. They also had a communication plan in place complete with a website, handouts with answers to FAQs and plenty of research showing the negative health effects of sugary drinks. Having employees understand the issue and get on board with it prepared them to explain the decision when patients had questions.

“
Once we started having that conversation, people got it. As a healthcare organization, we shouldn't be selling things that research shows go against health and can cause all these health conditions.
Gina Houmann, Program Manager

3 Increase options

Don't just remove SSBs; replace them with new beverage options that will get employees and visitors excited about what's available rather than focused on what's missing. Food service trade shows are a great place to find ideas.