



Building Capacity for Healthier Food Environments in British Columbia Recreational Facilities



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It may surprise you to learn that youth who are engaged in sports consume more fast foods and more sugary drinks than youth who are not (Nelson et al., 2011). Patti-Jean Naylor, Professor in the School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education at the University of Victoria, experienced this reality first hand taking her son to different activities and camps at their local community recreational facility. Puzzled that her son would bring home his packed lunch untouched, she soon figured out that the pop being offered at the facilities was keeping “the hunger at bay.” Over time, Naylor realized that the unhealthy food environment at her local recreational facility was not unique and that many other facilities across British Columbia (BC) were in a similar boat. Some facilities were even offering high fat breakfasts akin to the Atkins diet; what Naylor called the “heart attack special.” Recognizing the application of this issue to her research interests in obesity and chronic disease prevention, Naylor partnered with the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA). Together, they secured a small research grant from her university to begin addressing unhealthy food environments at local recreational facilities. Naylor believes that “If we’re really serious about childhood obesity, we can’t have recreation making it hard for families to make the right choices.” This story describes the **Healthy Food and Beverage Sales (HFBS) initiative**, with an emphasis on the role of policy in facilitating healthier food environments in British Columbia recreational facilities.

The Beginnings of Change: Healthy Public Policy Development

In 2005, Naylor and the BCRPA used the initial funding provided by her university to develop and implement a recreational facility audit survey across the province of BC. The aim of the audit was to assess the recreation food environment in terms of policy, programs, vending, concessions, fundraising, staff meetings, and events (Naylor et al., 2010). Ultimately, findings from the audit confirmed Naylor’s earlier observation that the foods being offered in many recreational facilities across the province were unhealthy.



*PJ Naylor, Professor
University of Victoria*



However, the good news was that, through her research, Naylor also identified a growing appetite in BC for positive change, both provincially and among recreation stakeholders (Naylor et al., 2010). Provincially, this appetite for change was reflected in the province's release of the *Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools* in 2005 (Province of British Columbia, 2015) and the *Healthier Choices in Vending Machines in BC Public Buildings Policy* in 2006 (Province of BC, 2014).

Amidst growing momentum in the province, findings from the facility audit survey became an important catalyst for change. Alarmed by the survey results, the Government of BC provided funding for Naylor and the BCRPA to develop and pilot a resource toolkit for recreational facilities, industry, and consumers to take action on improving food environments in recreational facilities. This provincial momentum continued and, in 2006, the BC Ministry of Health provided a significant amount of funding to the British Columbia Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA). The purpose of this funding was to implement different initiatives aimed at promoting healthy eating and physical activity, as well as reducing tobacco use (Naylor et al., 2010).

Looking back, the timing for the development of the initial toolkit, now called the

Stay Active Eat Healthy® toolkit, couldn't have been better as political support to build on existing healthy food environment initiatives was strong. As Naylor recalls, scaling up their existing healthy food environment toolkit was a natural fit for this new funding opportunity as the toolkit had already been piloted, tested for feasibility, and demonstrated positive initial results. This toolkit would ultimately go on to support one part of a new government funded healthy living initiative established by the BCHLA, called the HFBS initiative.



Healthy Eating in Recreational Facilities, Wikimedia

Taking Action: The Healthy Food and Beverage Sales (HFBS) Initiative

The aim of the HFBS initiative was to increase community capacity to provide and promote healthy food and beverage choices in community recreational facilities and government buildings through the voluntary adoption of provincial nutritional guidelines for (Province of BC, 2014).

Naylor's role was to determine the impact of the HFBS initiative on the overall food environment, vending and concession services, and customer choices and perceptions (Naylor et al., 2010).

The first implementation phase of the HFBS took place from 2008 to 2010, with 49 communities across BC taking part. Over the course of 3 years, the initiative provided interactive training sessions, resources, and seed funding to communities to build capacity to promote healthier food environments (Naylor et al., 2015). For example, community representatives learned how to use self-assessment tools and how to conduct vendor audits. They also had access to the online *Stay Active Eat Healthy®* toolkit, which provided helpful policy resources, such as example proposals and contracts (Naylor et al., 2015). Within each community, a variety of recreational and sports facilities participated, including hockey arenas, swimming pools, and fitness centres (Naylor et al., 2015).



Recreation Centre Exercise Class
Wikimedia Commons

Throughout the HFBS initiative, Naylor and her team explored what worked, as well as how the initiative could be improved. In particular, her team evaluated the impacts of the HFBS in three areas: (1) organizational capacity for providing a health-promoting food environment; (2) the health of vending machine products for sale; and (3) healthy food and beverage policy development. Throughout this process, Naylor and her research team identified a number of positive policy development impacts. For example, HFBS communities reported offering “more healthy and fewer unhealthy choices in their vending machines, and a greater number of them either reported having a healthy food and beverage policy in place or under development” (Naylor et al., 2015).

Another lesson learned through evaluation was the importance of local policy development. In the first implementation phase of the HFBS initiative, local policy development was not part of the training. However, Naylor and her project team learned, while working with HFBS community representatives, that developing local policy was a priority in order to create healthier food environments. Considering this important lesson, policy tools and resources were included in later editions of the *Stay Active Eat Healthy®* toolkit to enhance the overall initiative.

Lessons Learned: Essential Drivers for Action

Since its first implementation, the HFBS initiative has become an important catalyst for change. To date, over 60 communities from across BC have taken part. The following section describes key lessons learned through the initiative and how policy development at provincial and local levels was a core driver of success:

1. **Supportive political environment.** At the provincial policy level, creating healthy food environments in BC was on the policy agenda. The *Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools* (Province of British Columbia, 2015) and the *Healthier Choices in Vending Machines in BC Public Buildings Policy* (Province of British Columbia, 2014) were announced in 2005 and 2006, respectively. Around the same time, the Ministry also made a substantial investment in promoting healthy living through the BCHLA. This funding allowed research collaborations like Naylor's to bridge research, policy, and practice to tackle unhealthy food environments in recreational facilities. As Naylor notes, "obesity was on the agenda and in the public eye," which helped to make the issue more salient to recreational stakeholders, policy influencers, and funders.
2. **Building the evidence base and laying the foundation.** There was important groundwork that needed to happen before community change could take place. Evidence-based activities, such as the environment audit survey and development of the pilot toolkit, were essential building blocks towards the development of the HFBS initiative. They helped to make the case for why changing the food environment was important and provided an opportunity to engage local stakeholders in the project.
3. **Influential organizational champions and supportive boards.** A key driver in the success of the capacity building initiative was having a certain level of 'buy-in' and willingness from recreational facility representatives to improve the food environment. This readiness made it easier for recreational facilities to begin strategic planning and local policy development as enthusiasm had already been generated. Furthermore, having a recreational facility champion with decision making power and connections to their local municipality also helped advance policy change. Last, recreation boards that were supportive of improving the food environment at their facilities were seen as an important facilitator because, at the end of the day, they were responsible for approving the proposed policies.

4. **Refining the model together with stakeholders.** Naylor and her research team worked together with representatives from HFBS recreational facilities in the first round of the initiative. This collaboration during the implementation phase allowed missing pieces of the model to be identified. For example, Naylor discussed how they “didn’t really set out to develop policy, but in the mentor communities the first thing people did in the recreation environment [was] decide that they needed local facility policy to support action.” Developing local policy was later added to the *Stay Active Eat Healthy*® toolkit so that future communities could benefit from this lesson learned. Working together with communities during the implementation phase allowed the overall initiative to be strengthened and further aligned with local needs.
5. **Whole settings model: Flexible and adaptable to local needs.** Naylor also believed that the “whole setting model is a very good model to help people take actions where they’re ready and where they’re able.” A whole setting model is context specific, based on local needs and made up of multiple components and strategies for action (Naylor et al., 2010). For example, if recreation facilities were locked into a vendor contract, they could identify other areas for change in the meantime. This approach was important as it allowed communities to capitalize on a range of policy opportunities, while working through barriers and challenges.
6. **Strength in numbers.** National initiatives, such as the Coalition for Action on Childhood Obesity (CACO), leveraged work done in HFBS to broaden reach and deepen the impact of promoting healthy food and beverage to children across the country. As a result of CACO-sponsored webinars, presentations, funding, and stakeholder engagement across the country, in addition to ongoing support from the BC Ministry of Health, the HFBS toolkit has now been scaled to a national level to include examples from other provinces and territories across Canada.
7. **Tireless champion and dedicated partners.** Last, but not least, project sustainability and progression were fostered by having a long-term champion like Naylor and strong community partnerships like the BCRPA to support the project for over a decade. Contributing to policy change is a slow process, and requires perseverance and patience.



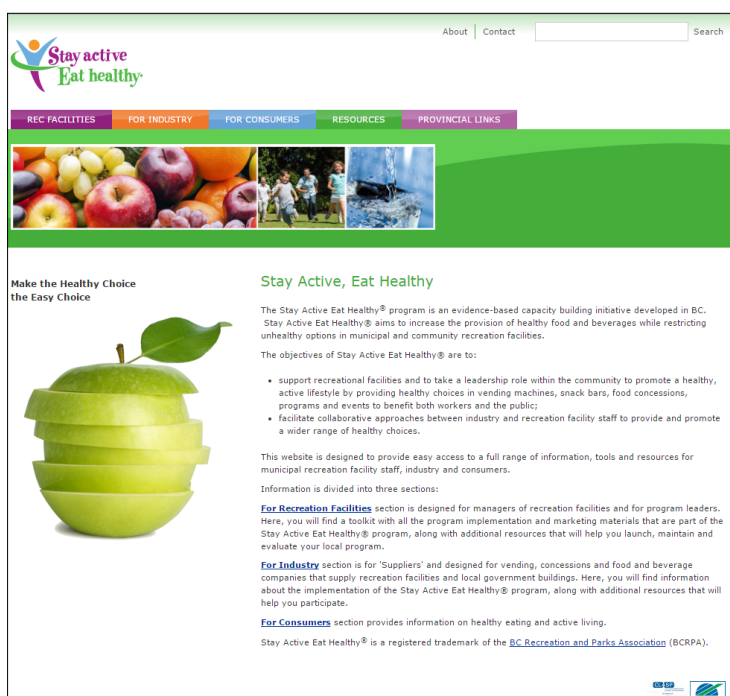
HFBS Initiative
BCRPA

Overcoming Road Blocks Along the Way

1. **Financial disincentive.** In Naylor's experience, boards typically needed to be prepared to lose some income initially to promote healthier options at recreational facilities. In some cases, the funding may have stabilized again and in other cases it has never recovered. Considering this, boards need to adjust their budget accordingly to "do the right thing" as Naylor describes it.
2. **Vendor challenges.** Throughout the initiative, there were a number of vendor challenges that made the transition to healthier food options difficult. For example, some community facilities were locked into vendor contracts, while others experienced lack of cooperation from vendors in adopting to the new policy. A helpful strategy to manage this challenge was to seek out other opportunities within their facilities where they could take make policy changes in the meantime. In another example, vendors also had their own concerns about low profit margins on healthy products and expiration dates (Naylor et al., 2015). Throughout the initiative, a key strategy to address these challenges was to engage industries in discussions on the value of healthier vendor items.
3. **Locally sustained momentum.** Communities that did not have a long-term champion to monitor the food environment were more likely to have their vending machines revert back to unhealthy food options even when there was a policy in place. Maintaining excitement throughout the change process was one strategy to continuously engage champions and celebrate small team wins along the way.
4. **Lack of nutrition knowledge and skill in the sector.** Many recreational facilities did not have the nutritional expertise on how to re-develop their vendor and concession food and beverage menu policy. One of the strategies to overcome this challenge was to help communities make the connection to provincial resources, such as the *HealthLink BC Dietitians*, which provided on-demand nutrition information support, including policy support to recreation and school sectors.
5. **Gaps in provincial policy.** While there was provincial policy support for this work, Naylor acknowledges that the BC government's *Healthier Choices in Vending Machines in BC Public Buildings Policy* (Province of BC, 2014) had room for improvement. Indeed, while the provincial policy provided a helpful starting point to discuss changing recreation food environments, it neglected to include recreational facilities in its definition of a public building. Further, concession stands were not included as a "food venue" in their policy. Incorporating recreation centres and concession stands in this policy would help enhance effectiveness and ensure that all public facilities have the same access to healthy food.

Rippling Out: Pan-Canadian Impact

Due to the success of the HFBS capacity building initiative to support healthy food policy in British Columbia, there has been a ripple effect across Canada. Other jurisdictions in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Quebec have participated in the HFBS training sessions with support from CACO (BC Recreation and Parks). Further, as a result of Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada funding for the *Eat, Play, Live Project*, there are now enhanced capacity-building activities in Alberta and Nova Scotia. Naylor is hopeful that future funding opportunities will allow for additional capacity building sessions with new communities across Canada. In the meantime, momentum continues to build as the *Stay Active Eat Healthy®* website and toolkit are regularly updated with new resources for recreational facility staff. Those looking to make improvements to their food environments through policy change are encouraged to visit the public website and toolkit as a starting point.



Stay Active Eat Healthy Website

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For more information on Stay Active Eat Healthy, please visit: [The Stay Active Eat Healthy® Website and Toolkit.](#)

For more information on British Columbia Recreation and Parks, please visit: <https://www.bcrpa.bc.ca/>.

For more information on British Columbia Healthy Living Alliance: please visit: www.bchealthyliving.ca/.

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