

The Feasibility of Health Information Signs at the Point-of-Sale for Sugary Drinks



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Introduction

Sugary drinks are the largest source of added sweeteners in the American diet and are the largest source of calories for teenagers. Their consumption is associated with weight gain, increased incidence of diabetes and cardiac events. Two-thirds of adults in King County and at least one-third of youth report consuming sugary drinks, with racial disparities in rates of consumption. Reducing access to and consumption of sugary drinks is likely to improve population health.

Background

The Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Unit at Public Health-Seattle & King County has been working to reduce consumption of sugary drinks through policy, systems and environmental change. Some local health departments (LHDs) are contemplating the idea of requiring retailers selling sugary drinks to post signs at the point-of-sale (POS) that provide consumers with health information about sugary drinks. The purpose of this project to assess the feasibility of such a policy in the event of a collaborative movement by LHDs nationally.

Methods

- Researched local efforts to implement health warning signs/labels for sugary drinks and tobacco products
- Reviewed literature on efficacy of this type of signage
- Assessed sugary drink display locations in grocery stores in south King County
- Conducted key informant interviews with 7 local stakeholders



Results

- Government-required speech must be factual, related to a legitimate government interest, and not preempted by higher laws
- There is not yet much evidence regarding the ability of in-store signage to change behaviors
- Sugary drinks are found in multiple areas of grocery stores and are heavily promoted
- Interview themes:
 - If pursued, this policy should be incorporated into a comprehensive plan
 - Focus on negative (v. positive) messaging
 - Education campaign is key
 - Work with retailers
 - Survey the community early and often

Recommendations

- Policies other than POS signs may be more effective and less challenging to implement
- If pursued, this policy should be part of a strategic plan and not enacted solo
- Work closely with an attorney to craft language and prepare for a lawsuit
- Collaborate with communities to determine messaging
- Pilot test the signs and evaluate to provide rationale for a county policy before moving forward with a proposal

Other considerations

- What is considered a sugary drinks and where are all the retail locations they are sold?
- How effective will the messaging be and what languages/literacy level will the signs be in?
- What department will oversee enforcement? What is the penalty for non-compliance?
- What resources are available for industry pushback?
- Other than water, what drink is healthy?

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