

# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO | San Diego, California

## Building Relationships Through Sodium Reduction

### Problem

Food prepared in commercial settings has a large effect on people's diets and health. More than 70% of dietary sodium in the United States comes from packaged and restaurant foods. Consuming too much sodium can lead to many poor health outcomes, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.

### Project

The Chronic Disease and Health Equity Unit of the County of San Diego received two funding opportunities through CDC to improve the county's food environment. Both opportunities create local initiatives that (1) increase access to and availability of lower sodium foods and (2) implement nutrition standards for food purchased, sold, or served by county entities.

### Outcomes

By working collaboratively, staff of the two county initiatives built relationships and promoted their successes to gain crucial support for developing county policies that benefit both programs.

### Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Salt [www.cdc.gov/salt](http://www.cdc.gov/salt)
- County of San Diego Healthy Works: Sodium Reduction Initiative <http://bit.ly/28Vog2T>
- County of San Diego Healthy Works: Prevention Initiative <http://bit.ly/290eN7V>

**Statement of Problem:** Americans consume too much sodium, with an average daily intake of 3,500 milligrams (mg) per day, about 1.5 times the daily limit recommended by the *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Poor nutrition and consumption of too much sodium can lead to poor health outcomes, including high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. About one in four adult residents in San Diego County (26.3%) report having high blood pressure. Reducing sodium and eating a healthy diet are important steps for controlling high blood pressure.

Meals prepared in commercial settings, such as worksite cafeterias and congregate meal programs, limit the choices consumers can make about the sodium content of their food; such food items often include high amounts of sodium already, and there is no opportunity for consumers to choose foods with less sodium. Therefore, the County of San Diego Chronic Disease and Health Equity (CDHE) Unit focused on increasing the availability, accessibility, and purchases of lower sodium food products in county-operated senior nutrition programs and detention facilities, the county's psychiatric hospital, and a worksite cafeteria.

**Project Description:** In 2014, CDHE received funding through CDC's Sodium Reduction in Communities Program (SRCP). With these funds, CDHE created the Healthy Works: Sodium Reduction Initiative (SRI) and immediately began engaging food service operators in county-run congregate meal programs and workplace cafeterias to provide lower sodium food options. CDHE worked closely with contractors, leaseholders, and staff in four different county departments, collaborating with Behavioral Health Services, the Public Safety Group, the Finance and General Government Group, and the Health and Human Services Agency (CDHE's parent agency).

SRI project sites include county detention centers, senior nutrition programs, and the Psychiatric Hospital of San Diego County; taken together, these sites reach more than 8,310 people per day. The SRI project also reaches about 3,000 government employees through interventions in one worksite cafeteria.





**Walter Hartman, Food Service Supervisor, City of Vista Senior Meals, displays a healthy, lower sodium lunch option.**

Photo Credit: Olivia Hughes

SRI staff built strong relationships with food service providers through regular communication and training activities. Project sites regularly communicated with the SRI team as they added lower sodium lunch and dinner entrees, swapped regular products for lower sodium versions, cooked more items from scratch, used fewer processed foods, and made salt-free seasoning packets available.

During the first year of the 2-year SRI project, CDHE was awarded a CDC State and Local Public Health Actions to Prevent Obesity, Diabetes, and Heart Disease and Stroke grant, referred to locally as the Healthy Works: Prevention Initiative (or, simply, Prevention). CDHE activities include the development and implementation of comprehensive nutrition standards for food purchased, sold, or served by County of San Diego entities. These will be called the Eat Well standards.

The overlapping time frame of these projects, along with the cooperative relationships established during the first year of the SRI project, gave CDHE a unique opportunity. SRI participants welcomed the opportunity to work with the same staff on the forefront of both sodium reduction and the development of nutrition standards for the county. The collaboration has made it easy for CDHE to start working toward Prevention goals with many of the same departments and food service providers.

**Outcomes:** The following are preliminary successes in reducing sodium at county venues:

- Detention centers: At centers for adult detainees, the number of lower sodium recipes rose from 6 to 10, resulting in a 14% increase in the number of lower sodium lunch entrees available in each 4-week menu cycle.
- Senior meals: One site offering senior meals increased the number of lunch items containing less than 500 mg of sodium by 24%. The chef's strategies included cooking from scratch, purchasing lower sodium items, and using more herbs, spices, and no-salt seasoning blends.
- Psychiatric Hospital of San Diego County: Staff reduced the sodium content of the teriyaki burger by 38% reduction by replacing a processed cheese product with real Swiss cheese and preparing the teriyaki sauce from scratch.
- Worksite cafeteria: Average sodium content in hot lunch entrees was reduced by 10% (from 728 mg to 653 mg) after 24 more offerings with less than 600 mg per serving were added.

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### For more information please contact

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SRI and Prevention staff worked closely together to build on these accomplishments. As a result, Prevention staff have been able to engage all county food service operators and gain support to develop Eat Well standards, one of the Prevention initiative’s primary goals. The Eat Well standards include increasing the availability of whole and fresh foods (especially locally-grown produce), the elimination of unnecessary salt, and procurement of lower sodium versions of commonly used ingredients.



The collective efforts already taking place in the County of San Diego helped develop food service operators’ support for these standards and provided a platform for operators to share information and ideas. County food service operators appreciate being part of the process and are looking forward to the valuable technical assistance that the SRI and Prevention staff will continue to provide once the new standards are approved.

**Conclusions:** CDHE used the funding from CDC’s SRCP and State and Local Public Health Actions to Prevent Obesity, Diabetes, and Heart Disease and Stroke grant to provide healthier and lower sodium foods at county facilities. These collaborative projects show how engaging stakeholders and building relationships can develop support to implement successful projects that reach multiple County departments. Engaging these various stakeholders is critical to the program’s success and enhances the standards that will positively affect the region’s nutrition, economic, and environmental health.

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