



## CASE STUDY

# Philadelphia: Local Nutrition Standards Guide City Food Purchasing for Nearly a Decade

When cities have healthy food available on public property, we all have more opportunity to choose what's best for our bodies. Cities that prioritize health in their food purchases make sure everyone has access to healthy choices in public places where we work, play, and learn — from municipal offices to public gyms to daycare facilities. It can also help cities save millions of dollars in preventable health care costs.

### BACKGROUND: Philadelphia — Addressing Upstream Causes of Poor Health

Philadelphia, with a population of nearly 1.6 million, is the largest city in Pennsylvania and the sixth largest city in the country.<sup>1</sup> It is also the poorest of the 10 largest cities,<sup>2</sup> with 23.1% of its population below the poverty level<sup>3</sup> and 14.4% qualifying as food insecure.<sup>4</sup> Demographically, 40.8% of residents identify as Black, 34.5% as white, and 14.7% as Hispanic.<sup>5</sup> Like other U.S. cities, some of the leading causes of death<sup>6</sup> and risk factors<sup>7</sup> in the population are diet-related: heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Economic injustice and structural racism have played a role in many Philadelphians living in neighborhoods where unhealthy food choices are the default — which leads to unhealthy diets and contributes to the development of chronic diseases.<sup>8</sup>

The city of Philadelphia serves about 15 million meals<sup>9</sup> annually in correctional facilities, youth detention centers, city-funded afterschool and summer programming,

shelters, city-funded early care and education facilities, congregate care facilities, and vending machines on city-owned or leased property.<sup>10</sup> Nearly a decade ago, the city recognized the opportunity to leverage its food purchasing power to improve the health of Philadelphians, reduce health care costs associated with diet-related diseases, and serve as a model for other large institutions, employers, and programs by implementing city-wide nutrition standards.

### POLICY ADOPTION: A Comprehensive Approach to Healthy Food Purchasing

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) collaborated with city agencies to develop the first edition of the Philadelphia Nutrition Standards. In June 2014, Mayor Michael Nutter signed Executive Order 4-14, which formalized implementation and compliance with the standards. The Nutrition Standards align with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for

Americans,<sup>11</sup> the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities,<sup>12</sup> and food standards adopted by other local governments (e.g., the New York City Food Standards).<sup>13</sup>

The most recent update of the standards in 2022 also incorporated review and feedback from city agencies, program participants, and external partners.<sup>14</sup> The standards include guidelines for purchased food (e.g., nutrition specifications for dairy, bread/pasta, cereal, fruits and vegetables, meat); standards for meals and snacks served (e.g., daily amounts of calories, sodium, and saturated fat); population-specific standards and exemptions; and standards for vending machines.

## OUTCOMES: The Proof is in the Hoagie

PDPH supports city agencies in implementing nutrition standards through a variety of activities, including engaging with vendors to increase the availability of compliant products. For example, city departments initially struggled

to find lower sodium alternatives to popular foods, like Philadelphia's iconic hoagie roll. PDPH partnered with a culinary innovation lab at Drexel University to develop a sodium-compliant hoagie roll and connect with a manufacturer to produce and market the product. The roll and several other products developed through this partnership are now in active distribution.<sup>15</sup>

While the Philadelphia Nutrition Standards encompass many food groups and nutrients, sodium reduction is a particular priority for PDPH as one in three adult Philadelphians have high blood pressure.<sup>16</sup> Since the introduction of the standards, city departments decreased sodium on their menus by 15% to 30%.<sup>17</sup> They have also made changes to their food preparation and cooking practices such as increasing the use of fresh fruits and vegetables instead of canned, switching from pre-made soups to homemade and draining and rinsing canned beans.

PDPH continues to work with city agencies to help them implement the standards into their contracts and food purchasing, preparation, and service activities.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 "The 200 Largest Cities in the United States by Population 2023." *World Population Review*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities>.
- 2 "Get Healthy Philly." *City of Philadelphia*, <https://www.phila.gov/programs/get-healthy-philly/>.
- 3 "Philadelphia County." *Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment 2022*, pp. 225, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10\\_11\\_22\\_web.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10_11_22_web.pdf).
- 4 "Philadelphia County." *Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment 2022*, pp. 269, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10\\_11\\_22\\_web.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10_11_22_web.pdf).
- 5 "Philadelphia County." *Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment 2022*, pp. 225, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10\\_11\\_22\\_web.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10_11_22_web.pdf).
- 6 "Philadelphia County." *Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment 2022*, pp. 225, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10\\_11\\_22\\_web.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10_11_22_web.pdf).
- 7 "Philadelphia County." *Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment 2022*, pp. 269, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10\\_11\\_22\\_web.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10_11_22_web.pdf).
- 8 *Philadelphia Nutrition Standards*, Philadelphia Department of Public Health, February 2022, pp. 1, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022\\_Revision\\_Final.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022_Revision_Final.pdf).
- 9 *Philadelphia Nutrition Standards*, Philadelphia Department of Public Health, February 2022, pp. 1, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022\\_Revision\\_Final.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022_Revision_Final.pdf).
- 10 *Philadelphia Nutrition Standards*, Philadelphia Department of Public Health, February 2022, pp. 2, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022\\_Revision\\_Final.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022_Revision_Final.pdf).
- 11 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*, 9th edition, U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2020, [dietaryguidelines.gov](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov).
- 12 Food Service Guidelines Federal Workgroup. *Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, [https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/guidelines\\_for\\_federal\\_concessions\\_and\\_vending\\_operations.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/guidelines_for_federal_concessions_and_vending_operations.pdf).
- 13 "New York City Food Standards." *NYC Food Policy*, City of New York, 2023, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/foodpolicy/governance-initiatives/nyc-food-standards.page>.
- 14 *Philadelphia Nutrition Standards*, Philadelphia Department of Public Health, February 2022, pp. 1, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022\\_Revision\\_Final.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20220223112343/Nutrition-Standards-2022_Revision_Final.pdf).
- 15 This information was provided by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health.
- 16 "Philadelphia County." *Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment 2022*, pp. 269, [https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10\\_11\\_22\\_web.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20221011134037/CHNA-All-10_11_22_web.pdf).
- 17 This information was provided by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health.

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