

Communities ChooseWell Challenge: Benchmarking Food Environments

Lethbridge, Alberta



The Initiative

In Lethbridge, Alberta, the Healthy Lethbridge network, with funding from Communities ChooseWell worked with the University of Alberta and public health to develop a healthy eating strategy for public recreation facilities beginning in 2018.

The City of Lethbridge

The City of Lethbridge, Alberta, located south of Calgary, close to the Canadian Rocky Mountains acknowledges that they gather on the lands of the Blackfoot people of the Canadian Plains and pay respect to the Blackfoot people past, present and future while recognizing and respecting their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to the land. The City of Lethbridge is also home to the Metis Nation of Alberta. With a population of over 100,00 people (106,550 to be more precise), Lethbridge is home to the University of Lethbridge, and a diverse workforce focused on commerce, finance, transportation, agriculture, and industry, but with 50% of its workforce employed in the health, education, retail, and hospitality sectors. The top five employers are government-based. The city boasts performing arts theatres, museums and sport centres (Source: Wikipedia).



A Food Benchmarking Nutrition Report Card

In the City of Lethbridge, Alberta, [Healthy Lethbridge](#) established a network of organizations including the Lethbridge Sports Council, Lethbridge Speed Skating Club, Lethbridge Figure Skating Club, Runner's Soul, Be Fit for Life, Alberta Health Services (Public Health Nutrition Services), the University of Lethbridge, and the City of Lethbridge (Recreation and Leisure) to conduct a Food Benchmarking Nutrition Report Card for all of the public recreation centres in Lethbridge. The Network collaborated with Dr. Kim Raine and Krista Milford, from the University of Alberta, to create a nutrition report card for the City of Lethbridge public recreation facilities. The network also worked with University of Lethbridge faculty, Dr. Marc Bomhof and Paula McDonald to collect data.

A patron survey was conducted as part of the initial food benchmarking work and indicated that patrons would like to see healthier options at recreation centres. See a summary of the patron survey results [here](#). Both the data and the survey were presented to the City Council in 2020 with an agreement to take steps to address the food environment in public recreation centres. Positive aspects such as free access to public water fountains and support for breastfeeding were highlighted as a success of the benchmarking report card. Another success was removing the candy machines at all public recreation centres. The City of Lethbridge also arranged for a local public health dietitian to provide education and ideas to all food service providers or managers of public recreation facilities. A challenge was put out to all providers to improve food items. At that time, only one facility participated – the Spitz Baseball Stadium.

The Network will be revisiting the recreation centres using Dr. Raine's Food Benchmarking app. A student dietetic intern from the University of Alberta will use the app in the spring of 2024 to present an updated status to Lethbridge city council. Using the [benchmarking](#) work from Dr. Raine provided an objective measure to assess the initiative's starting point and progress as well as eliminating the subjective point of view and personal opinions related to food and beverages choices.

To date, the most significant change has been the removal of the candy machines, and although this is seen as a "big win", there is more work to be done. On another positive note, during the report card assessment, the city agreed to keep the "Breastfeeding Welcome Here" signs which helped to improve the overall grade. Those signs remain in the recreation facilities and the candy machines have remained out. The Network is hoping that the next step will be the development of a policy with clear expectations and guidelines to increase healthier food options.

For more, [click here](#).

For the city's response, [click here](#).

The Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic interfered with the momentum initially established with the local sport teams and has yet to be re-established. However, the greatest challenge has been trying to change the social norms related to food sold at recreation centres. Given that the availability of less healthy foods and beverages has been normalized for many years, the public continues to request these foods. Further, vendors need more education and support about how to create change. A policy by the City of Lethbridge would be most useful to encourage change and improvement.

A 'C' in Lethbridge

- The report card, released in 2020, assigned Lethbridge a grade of 'C', higher than the provincial average of a 'D'. The City of Lethbridge was supportive of adding Breastfeeding Welcome Here signs at all of the facilities and all had access to free drinking water besides the Spitz Stadium. Fountains had options for people using wheelchairs and access for younger children.
- The committee has also partnered with schools in the past and had an impact by their voices being heard due to a significant amount of media attention that resulted in some positive changes; it is a strategy that may be re-visited in the future.
- The Lethbridge YMCA also improved the average rating based on their excellent score. In this video, Joanna Jones from the Lethbridge YMCA speaks about the Y's support of healthier foods to the community.



Lessons Learned

A number of lessons learned will guide the next steps of this initiative:

- Despite the support and guidance from the success of the KFL&A Health Department in Kingston, Ontario, whose work on healthy eating for sport and recreation leagues was at the cornerstone of these efforts, the network recognized the need to further rely on the voice of patrons who have requested healthier food options.
- Though thankful for the involvement of volunteers and student interns, having paid project coordinators and / or other supports may have provided more continuity.
- Adding a stronger communication strategy is something that the group would like to further investigate. They did get local and national attention in the media when they presented to City Council so using media and communications to promote and improve choices would benefit the cause.
- The Lethbridge YMCA serves as an example of what can be done successfully.
- It is important to secure some initial wins and build from those successes. For example, the City of Lethbridge provides free access to public water, breastfeeding is supported in the public facilities and the candy machines have been removed. Small changes can provide the foundation for broader and bigger changes still to come.
- To make further changes, it is critical to have a policy in place to guide and support healthier food options in recreation facilities.

For more information

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