

# FRESH-IT

**Final Research Report**

**Waterloo Region 2019**



Region of Waterloo  
PUBLIC HEALTH AND  
EMERGENCY SERVICES

FRESH-IT: Implementing a PHAC/Health Canada Local Government Toolkit in Smaller Jurisdictions to Develop Evidence-Informed Retail Food Environment Interventions.

Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services (ROWPHE) would like to thank municipal staff in the Cities of Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo and the townships of North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich as well as elected officials, food service operators and food service distributors who offered their time and expertise to the FRESH-IT project.

In Waterloo Region, the FRESH-IT Team consisted of Ellen Gregg – Public Health Nutritionist (Lead), Sharlene Sedgwick Walsh – Director of Healthy Living, Katherine Pigott – Manager of Adult Health, Adele Parkinson – Manager of Child Health, Jordan Steffler – Acting Manager of the Healthy Living Information and Planning Team, Sanjay Govindaraj - Health Promotion and Research Analyst, Carolyn Tereszowski – Public Health Nutritionist, Katie MacDonald - Health Promotion and Research Analyst, Manpreet Singh – Project Coordinator, Nora Kozman – Public Health Dietitian, Molly Leader – Public Health Dietitian, Rosanne Gray – Program Assistant, Kristen Lacroix – Dietetic Intern, Megan Thomson – Dietetic Intern and Donna Lowes – Dietetic Intern.

The FRESH-IT network is led by Dr. Catherine L. Mah at Dalhousie University in collaboration with Dr. Leia Minaker at the University of Waterloo, supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR FRN# KAL139697).



Food Retail Environments  
Shaping Health:  
Intervention Toolkit

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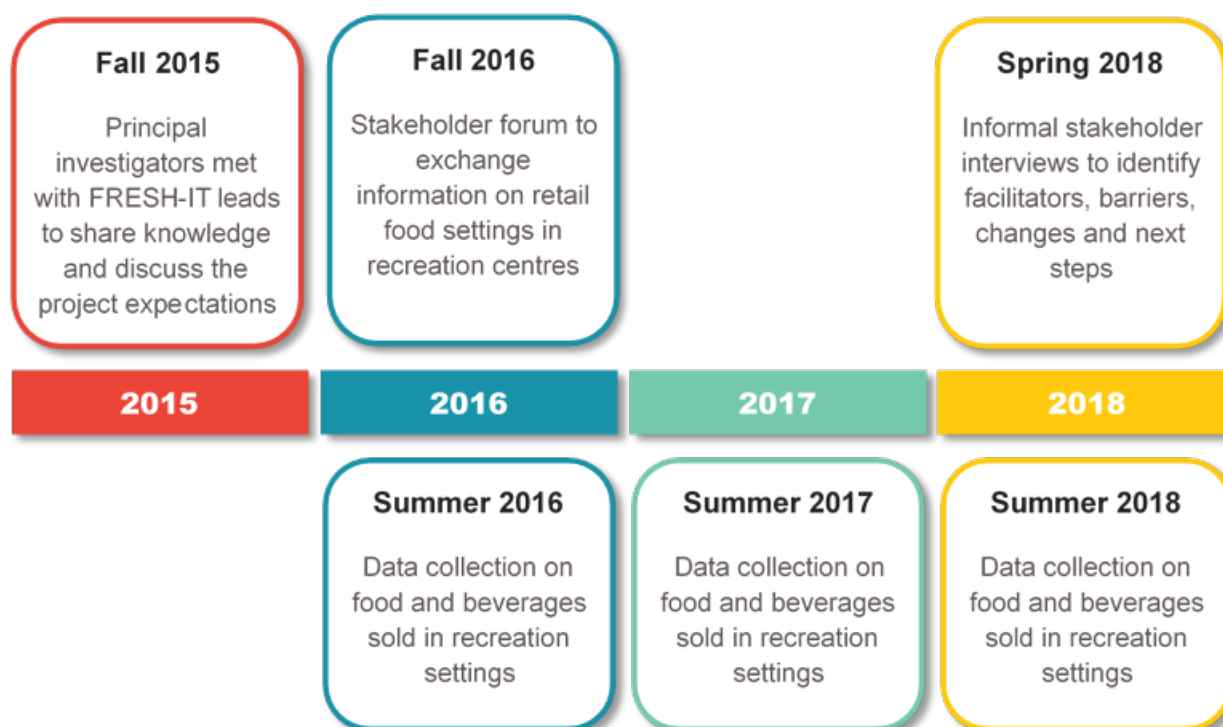
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## Executive Summary

### Background on the FRESH-IT Project

From 2015 to 2018, ROWPHE participated as a lead in the Canada-wide FRESH-IT project. The purpose of the FRESH-IT project was to exchange information with decision makers about offering healthier food in retail settings. In Waterloo Region, food retail settings in municipally funded recreation centres were selected for the project. Additionally, the project aimed to identify facilitators in making healthy changes to retail food settings. Stakeholders that participated in the project included: elected officials, municipal staff, food service operators and food distributors.

### FRESH-IT Intervention



#### Fall 2015

The principle investigators for the FRESH-IT project offered several education sessions for project leads. This was intended to exchange knowledge about the current research on healthy retail food environments. The principle investigators also met with leads to discuss the purpose of the research and the expectations for the leads to participate in the project.

#### Summer 2016

The FRESH-IT intervention began in 2016, with a baseline assessment of the existing retail food environments in recreation centres.

### **Fall 2016**

In October 2016, a forum was held for municipal and food industry stakeholders. The forum provided an overview of the importance of recreation centres as a setting for health promotion. In 2017 and 2018, ROWPHE worked to address the suggested priorities stakeholders identified in the 2016 forum and provided consultations to municipal and food industry stakeholders (i.e., plan and evaluate possible change, identify and troubleshoot the challenges to making changes in recreation settings, offer support for the change management process, provide consultations to assess settings and identify healthy food and beverage options, support pilot projects and research and share results to inform decision makers, provide information for municipal decision makers and elected officials).

### **Summer 2017**

Data collection on the food and beverage products available in retail settings in recreation centres to monitor objective changes to the food environment.

### **Spring 2018**

Municipal and food industry stakeholders provided information on the facilitators and barriers to making change in retail food settings in Waterloo Region. Stakeholders provided information on their planned next steps and suggested ways that Public Health could assist with their efforts to create healthy eating environments in their recreation setting.

### **Summer 2018**

Data collection on the food and beverage products available in retail settings in recreation centres to monitor objective changes to the food environment. Not all municipalities were able to continue participating in the retail site assessments. However, several municipalities informally reported making changes to their retail food and beverage offerings.

Throughout the FRESH-IT project, Public Health provided consultation services to municipal stakeholders, (i.e., meetings with municipal staff and decision-makers to discuss findings and make plans for next steps, meetings with food service operators to share knowledge and work towards offering healthier food and beverages).

## **Outcomes**

Although the main purpose of the FRESH-IT project was to exchange information, several municipalities took action to make improvements to their food retail settings. For example, some municipalities offered healthier choices in their recreation concessions. Other municipalities removed food and beverage vending machines and coin operated candy machines to reduce children's exposure to less healthy food and beverages. One municipality replaced concession services with healthier vending machine services.

## **Next Steps**

The FRESH-IT project officially ended December 2018. ROWPHE remains committed to promoting healthy eating in the community. Public Health will continue to work with municipalities to address barriers and create healthy food retail environments in recreation settings in Waterloo Region.

## Part 1: Background on the FRESH-IT Project

ROWPHE participated in the FRESH-IT project beginning in 2015. Dr. Catherine Mah and Dr. Leia Minaker are the project leads for the study, which was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. This knowledge exchange project was intended to develop evidence-informed, testable, local population health interventions in Canada and to improve access to healthier food and beverages in the retail food environment.

In Waterloo Region, retail food settings in municipally run recreation centres were selected for the intervention. Enhancing the nutritional quality of food and beverages in recreation centres was a strategic opportunity to align the actions of recreation centres with other federal and provincial initiatives to promote the physical and mental health of children and youth in Waterloo Region.

This report outlines the outcomes of the FRESH-IT project. An [interim FRESH-IT research report](#), is also available.

## Part 2: Methods

1. Each municipality received an official letter invitation from Public Health to participate in the FRESH-IT project. This invitation outlined the proposed site assessments based on the following criteria:
  - a) Condition of the water fountains on-site and taste of the water (based on the [Bright Bites Water Access Scan Tool](#)).
  - b) Presence of marketing for less healthy food and beverages.
  - c) Price, product name, product size, nutrition information and ingredient information for each menu item in vending machines, restaurants and concessions.
2. Information was gathered during meetings, conversations and through informal and formal correspondence with municipalities about changes that were planned or being implemented in recreation centres throughout Waterloo Region.

## Part 3: Outcomes

### Measured Changes in Retail Food and Beverages in Recreation Settings in 2018

The purpose of the objective retail assessments was to reflect the relative price and proportion of healthier food and beverages offered for sale in retail settings within recreation centres. As not all municipalities were able to participate in the retail site assessments in 2018, the year over year findings of the municipalities will not be reported.

## **Reported Changes in Retail Food and Beverages in Recreation Settings in 2018**

### **Municipal Action Example A:**

One municipality engaged with multiple internal and external stakeholders to create an informal agreement with their vending machine operator to offer healthier food and beverages in their facilities. The vending machine operator offered several important insights into the nature of the vending business and the challenges in sustaining healthier choices in the vending machines long-term. For example, multiple drivers service each site and the drivers may not be aware the healthier products are in the machine as part of an agreement with the site to offer a larger proportion of healthier options, regardless of financial performance. Therefore, healthier products may be removed from the machines if they are not selling well.

One of the staff at this municipality championed the FRESH-IT initiative and brought the project to several municipal staff meetings to engage in discussion and create buy-in for change. During one meeting, the champion proposed that their recreation facilities were located within a food swamp (meaning that there is an overabundance of exposure to less healthy food and beverages in retail settings surrounding the recreation facilities). The municipality had also been involved with a health promotion initiative that focused on increasing physical access to tap water as well as promoting healthy eating and tap water as a healthy choice. The champion proposed that vending machines be removed from facilities that had programming of short duration, as there was no need for retail food services in these settings. The removal of the machines would create a supportive environment where the healthy choices were the easy choices. Since that meeting, several recreation managers in this municipality have confirmed that they have either removed vending machines or were in the process of having them removed from the recreation facility. Additionally, coin operated candy machines were removed from the majority of their recreation settings.

This municipality also made several alterations to food and beverages offered in concession services to increase the proportion of healthier food and beverages available in these settings. Pricing incentives were also introduced for healthier options to enhance sales.

### **Community Benefits**

In several cases, the recreation facilities were in close proximity to a school. The removal of the vending machines in these facilities supports the Ontario Ministry of Education's Food and Beverage Policy PPM 150. This action reduces exposure to less healthy food and beverages in close proximity to settings where children learn. The removal of beverage machines is also beneficial from an environmental standpoint. For example, facilitating the use of reusable water containers to access water from fountains reduces the use of plastic bottles from vended beverages.

Reducing the availability of candy, increasing healthier options and changing the pricing structure make the food environment in recreation settings a supportive healthy eating environment. Temptation to purchase less healthy options is decreased. There is an increased variety of healthier options, which are also more affordable and therefore more appealing to recreation centre patrons.



**Municipal Action Example B:**

Food and beverages were altered in municipally run concession stands to increase the proportion of healthier choices available. Several products were trialled along with changes in pricing structure meant to make healthier choices more appealing. The municipality shared their experiences with FRESH-IT researchers, providing an opportunity for learning more about the barriers in the existing food system that makes it difficult to offer healthier food and beverages in recreation settings.

This municipality also removed all coin operated candy and toy machines from their recreation settings. The municipal decision-makers expressed a preference to support the concept that physical activity is the reward, rather than providing external forms of motivation to promote children's participation in physical activity.

**Community Benefits**

These are important changes to create a healthier food environment in recreation settings. Children are often motivated to request less healthy food and beverages when they are sold in retail settings. Coin operated candy machines may be appealing to children as they are inexpensive and are typically placed at a children's eye level. Removing candy machines creates a supportive environment where parents do not have to say no to their children's requests to protect their children's health.

**Municipal Action Example C:**

Another success story involved a municipal staff member who championed the FRESH-IT initiative in their community. As a result, the municipality leveraged funding from another health promotion project to renovate the concession in their recreation setting. The municipality completely removed the concession stand from one facility and ceased municipal operation of another concession stand. The municipality replaced the concession services with healthier vending machines and hot beverage machines to ensure that clients had access to food during recreation programming of a longer duration.

**Community Benefits**

As a result of these changes, the food environment operated by the municipality promotes healthier food and beverage choices and reduces exposure to less healthy food and beverages.

**Municipal Action Example D:**

Two municipalities have leveraged funding from another health promotion project to offer smoothies in their concessions. These municipalities have collaborated to share recipes.

**Community Benefits**

The experience of one of these municipalities suggests that the introduction of healthier choices can be an important source of revenue as there are more options available to clients who have a preference for healthy eating. Profit does not have to be a barrier to offering healthier choices in recreation settings.

## Part 4: Conclusion

Each municipality in Waterloo Region participated in the FRESH-IT project and many positive changes have been implemented. Throughout the FRESH-IT project, municipal staff facilitated opportunities for public health staff to meet with food vendors, food distributors and municipal decision-makers to discuss current practices as well as potential actions that could be taken to promote healthy eating in recreation settings in Waterloo Region.

The FRESH-IT project aimed to exchange information with decision makers about offering healthier food in retail settings. However, a by-product of information sharing is that municipal staff took the initiative to make changes to the food and beverages sold in recreation settings. As a result of their dedication and considerable efforts, there has been a shift to create supportive healthy eating environments in recreation settings across Waterloo Region.

There were multiple facilitators in the success of the FRESH-IT initiative:

1. An ongoing region-wide health promotion campaign offered the opportunity to align this project with the goals of the larger health promotion project. The existence of a steering committee to support the health promotion initiative created venue to learn about stakeholder needs and plan the FRESH-IT activities to benefit the stakeholders.
2. Public Health offered staff time for consultations with municipalities to assist with planning and implementing their desired initiatives.
3. Both the FRESH-IT project and the larger health promotion initiative had funding, which enabled several important actions to be taken including:
  - a. a forum to learn about the issues related to food in recreation settings, learn about success stories, discuss possible actions with municipal peers and representatives from the food industry.
  - b. informative videos tailored to the audience utilizing the recreation setting.
  - c. the opportunity to collect data on each site to compare food and beverages against objective nutrition standards. The data collection process enabled public health staff to collate a list of healthier food and beverages that could be offered in recreation centre retail settings.
4. Funding from the larger health promotion initiative was also used to implement some of the municipal plans, including building infrastructure and purchasing food preparation equipment.

## Part 5: Next Steps

ROWPHE remains a committed partner with respect to promoting healthy eating in the community. Public Health will continue to work with municipalities to address barriers with an ideal outcome of creating healthy food retail environments in recreation settings in Waterloo Region.