



TESTIMONY OF THE
CONNECTICUT CONFERENCE OF MUNICIPALITIES
TO THE
PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE

March 3, 2008

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony on this important proposal before you today.

CCM supports, **H.B. 5705, "An Act Concerning The Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease Through Community-Based Physical Activity Programs."**

H.B. 5705, would establish a program to provide grants to municipalities for the purposes of developing community-based physical activity programs to prevent or reduce the incidence of cardiovascular disease and obesity among children and adults.

In 2005, the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities was awarded a planning grant by the National League of Cities (NLC) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to raise awareness among municipal officials of the key leadership roles they can play in preventing child obesity. Implemented in collaboration with the Connecticut Commission on Children (COC), the initiative sought to orient municipal officials to the problem of childhood obesity, promote promising practices and policies, and determine what resources municipal officials need to become more effective leaders on this issue.

Several Connecticut-based agencies and organizations assisted us in identifying collaborative opportunities, resources and promising practices. Those entities included the Connecticut Department of Public Health, the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University, the University of Connecticut Health Center, and CitySeed of New Haven

CCM and COC held regional meetings in New Haven, Norwich and Hartford. At the meetings, municipal officials brainstormed different ways to address childhood obesity, identified challenges in implementing various efforts, and provided partnership opportunities among various communities.

Lessons learned from the meetings:

- Municipalities can best approach childhood obesity by having incentives to think outside the box. Town and city departments can collaborate to best effect change for children's health. Involvement of the private sector and higher education in the state can also be a big help.

- Like most efforts at the local level, childhood obesity programs and initiatives work best with support from municipal leadership. If a town or city leader is incentivized, the agenda moves quicker and easier. In addition, sensitivity to cultural differences is important in engaging diverse communities.
- Understanding the community's needs, strengths and challenges are key in successfully implementing a local effort. What works for one city may not work for another town. Also, grassroots outreach, like directly connecting with merchants, is a great way to enhance public participation.

Workshop with Youth

One important way to determine how to address youth obesity is to get suggestions from the source. So in addition to information-sharing with local leaders, the Childhood Obesity Initiative participated in the Second Annual Youth Summit hosted by the Village for Children and Families and the Urban League of Greater Hartford. Youth from Hartford and surrounding communities discussed their views on childhood obesity, and they learned about the recent legislation requiring school districts to have wellness plans and the removal of soda from school vending machines.

As part of the workshop, youth were asked to complete surveys on their attitudes regarding nutrition and physical activity. Their responses demonstrated that youth are keenly aware of the need to exercise and eat right, but they are also quite candid about ways their communities can help.

Common themes in the young persons' responses included the following:

- Safety concerns make physical activity difficult for many youth in urban environments. Youths surveyed identified crime-related barriers to leaving home, such as gangs, drug dealers and kidnappers in their neighborhood.
- All youths surveyed indicated that they exercise, either alone or with friends, classmates or family members.
- School recess and physical education do not meet the youths' needs for daily exercise. On average, physical education classes occur only two days a week.
- Youth value a range of recreation programs, including Boys and Girls Clubs, afterschool programs, and school recreation and sports programs and facilities. Many of these programs are free to youths in Hartford.
- All youths indicated that they could distinguish between healthy and unhealthy foods. Awareness of specific foods within these categories ranged in sophistication from (a) fruits and vegetables vs. junk food to (b) grains, poultry, seafood, fruits and vegetables vs. fat, oil and candy.
- Despite the poor reputation of fruits and vegetables in many urban supermarkets, the youths surveyed indicated no trouble in accessing fresh fruits and vegetables there. It was unclear however whether the food available at those markets was of high quality. One youth indicated that her family buys fresh produce at a farmers' market.
- Most youths surveyed eat breakfast every day, and some rely on school breakfast programs.

- Youths offered a range of suggestions for municipal strategies to address obesity, including:
 - more local recreation facilities and programs, including gyms, swimming pools and “strawberry patches”
 - more gyms reserved for younger children
 - more walk-a-thon events
 - improved access to quality food, including health food
 - a bicycle trail with bike rentals available

Cable Show Opportunity

As part of the initiative, the childhood obesity team offered local leaders tools to help them develop a cable program for their local access channels. Municipal officials were offered varied levels of assistance in the show’s development and implementation – from suggesting speakers and promising practices to sources for statistical data and research. The show offers a unique opportunity for local leaders to present the issue to constituents in a clear, engaging manner.

Public Service Announcement

The broadest outreach made available was by way of a radio public service announcement (one version in English, another in Spanish). The message featured three Connecticut mayors: Eddie Perez of Hartford, Betsy Paterson of Mansfield and James Richetelli of Milford) and suggested ways listeners could take ownership of their health and well being by taking five easy steps. The announcement, sent to radio stations around the state, also refers listeners to a website co-sponsored by CCM and COC that offers additional information on promising practices and community efforts: www.getmovingct.org.

Other Communication with Municipal Officials

CCM and COC developed and distributed a Management Bulletin on childhood obesity, including information on the initiative, Connecticut statistics, and useful resources. Three articles on childhood obesity were featured in *Connecticut Town & City*, CCM’s bi-monthly publication to local and state officials. Further, childhood obesity was a focus of a workshop at CCM’s 2005 annual convention: “Urgent Youth Initiatives: Obesity, Violence and Bullying”.

The initiative spread the word about several innovative municipal programs, including:

- **The NorWALKERS project** -- involved the development of walking routes throughout the city to encourage physical activity. The routes, many of which start at elementary schools, also highlight points of interest on the route for environmental and history buffs. Walking routes have been mapped for 10 major city neighborhoods and average one-half to three miles.
- **New Haven/WeWin:** -- The New Haven Family Alliance, Inc. (NHFA) and the WeWalk In New Haven (We WiN) issued a call to action to city residents – particularly African-Americans and Latinos – to get moving on walking trails, tracks, parks and malls.

We WiN participants use pedometers to complete their “10,000 Step” program, which enables users to track their everyday steps and record their progress. Beginning with a kick-off meeting on

the New Haven Green, the We WiN program recruited participants for various walking regimens that utilized city and state parks, among other sites. During inclement weather, a variety of indoor facilities were utilized, and for those unable to leave home, walking tapes with expert instruction were available. Through a coalition member, We WiN also addressed the physical fitness of New Haven's disabled community.

- **Stamford/BMI Analysis:** Current data show that Stamford's youth – especially Hispanic children – are at risk for becoming overweight. According to a 2004 Stamford Health Department study of 651 eleventh grade public school students, 10% of eleventh grade students are overweight. This figure includes close to one-third of Hispanic students and one-quarter of Black students. Furthermore, poor scores on school fitness tests support the need for increased physical activity and improved nutritional education for Stamford school children. Of a total of 3,761 Stamford school students recently tested, only 24.3% of boys and 27.5% of girls met or exceeded the health standard.

In response to the research, Stamford Health Director Johnnie Lee collaborated with the Stamford Public Schools to document the body mass index (BMI) of youth in two high schools. Upon collection and review of that information, the two departments crafted recommended changes in the way school days are structured and modifications to physical education requirements. The approach also included parents and caregivers, who were seen as playing a crucial role in changing behaviors.

- **Hartford/Outreach to Market Owners** -- The city's Health and Human Services Department created an inter-departmental plan to address childhood obesity through intervention in four critical areas: shopping, cooking, eating and moving. Among the intervention measures used was the development of partnerships with restaurants, food pantries and grocery stores. Those merchants who joined the partnership were provided recognition certificates and other incentives.

The efforts were also folded into the objectives of the city's Diabetes Task Force, which seeks to support diabetes nutrition and education through measures such as outreach to explain the Food Guide Pyramid and food labels. The task force has also developed plans to provide healthy cooking ideas to Hartford residents through a cable access show and a citywide healthy recipe contest.

- **Mansfield/Walking Trails** -- Mansfield is known for its many parks and walking trails, most of which are highlighted during Connecticut Trails Day (June) and the Walking Weekends (October). Mansfield also has several bike trails; both are available through the Mansfield Recreation Department.

Many of the trails have been constructed through a partnership with collegiate neighbor University of Connecticut. The trails have become part of the Matters of the Heart Partnership, which serves to prevent cardiovascular illness and prevent cardiovascular conditions in Mansfield and five other towns in the health district. Other components of the partnership include a before-school exercise program for overweight/obese third- and fourth-graders, school workgroups to improve the nutrition and amount of physical activity students receive, and an after-school cooking/nutrition class for middle school students.

H.B. 5705 would help municipalities expand on existing services and develop new ones based on the knowledge and awareness acquired through the CCM/COC grant. H.B. 5705 is a far-sighted proposal that will help municipalities take strides in creating a healthier environment for the citizens of Connecticut.

CCM asks that you *favorably report H.B. 5705.*

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For more information, please contact Donna Hamzy or Gian-Carl Casa at (203) 498-3000.

