



APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING
THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED BUDGET ADJUSTMENTS
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2010

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Good evening members of the Appropriation Committee. My name is Alycia Santilli and I'm the Assistant Director of CARE, the Community Alliance for Research and Engagement at the Yale School of Public Health. I'm also a resident of New Haven. I'm here tonight to speak out about the Governor's proposed cuts to the Healthy Food Certification funding. At present Healthy Food Certification program allows 10 cents per school meal for participating districts to bring healthier school meals to their children.

Now is not the time to make cuts to this important program. Obesity is a national epidemic and urban areas like New Haven are disproportionately affected by it. To improve the health of city residents, CARE – a partnership between the New Haven community and Yale University – aims to reduce chronic disease and obesity by promoting a healthy lifestyle, including improving nutrition. This past fall, CARE completed a large study of New Haven residents. We surveyed 1,175 fifth and sixth grade students in 12 randomly selected New Haven Public Schools about their diet and exercise habits and also took their physical measures, including height and weight. We also collected similar surveys from 1,205 randomly selected households in six of New Haven's highest risk neighborhoods. The research findings that I refer to herein are the most recent data of this type to be collected. I think you'll agree that what we found is shocking.

It is important to note that New Haven residents are some of the poorest in the state, as you well know. Because there are so many low-income families in New Haven, all of our children have access to universal breakfast and lunch programs. The household surveys that we conducted reveal that eighteen percent of households – or almost one in five – report 'food insecurity,' meaning that they or their family did not have enough money to buy food in the past 30 days. We can assume that their ability to purchase healthy, fresh foods is also limited. Our survey of 5th and 6th graders also offers perspective into the types of foods that children are eating outside of school. We found that over one-quarter (26%) of students eat in fast food restaurants three or more times per week; almost one-third (30%) eat sugary foods like cookies and candy five or more days per week; and 40% drink sugary soft drinks like soda five or more days per week. These findings clearly indicate that our children are consuming unhealthy foods outside of schools – foods that lead to obesity. It is essential that school meals provide quality food. Schools – where our children are eating two meals five days per week – are a place where we can ensure that nutritious and healthy meals.

Another striking and disturbing finding of our research is that 47% of children were overweight or obese. That's almost one half of children. This is 1 ½ times higher than

national averages.¹ Additionally, we found that 9% of children are at risk of hypertension. These numbers speak volumes about the childhood obesity problems we face. It is at a level that we have never seen before. We are left only to imagine what health problems these children will encounter when they reach adulthood.

Schools are traditionally a place to instill values and model good behaviors for children to bring into their adult years – all in hope for great success. This includes modeling healthy behaviors. Given this tradition, we are obligated to provide the most nutritious foods possible to our children. The Healthy Food Certification program allows us to fulfill this obligation. Please do not support Governor Rell's proposed cuts to this program. Our children's health depends on it.

¹ High Body Mass Index for Age Among US Children and Adolescents, 2003-2006. Cynthia L. Ogden; Margaret D. Carroll; Katherine M. Flegal. *JAMA*. 2008; 299(20): 2401-2405.