

Testimony of the Connecticut Association of Directors of Health
Comments on Raised Bill No. 6525: An Act Establishing a Childhood Obesity Task Force

To the Distinguished Co-Chairs and Members of the Children Committee
March 5, 2013

Good afternoon, distinguished Co-Chairs and Members of the Children Committee. My name is Karen Spargo, President of the Connecticut Association of Directors of Health (CADH) and Director of Health of the Naugatuck Valley Health District, serving the towns of Ansonia, Beacon Falls, Derby, Naugatuck, Seymour and Shelton.

CADH supports *Raised Bill No. 6525: An Act Establishing a Childhood Obesity Task Force*, subject to amended language that incorporates public health representation on such a task force. State and local public health professionals have long been at the forefront of battling obesity in Connecticut. Among many examples of the important work of local health departments specifically:

- The Northeast District Department of Health (serving Brooklyn, Canterbury, Eastford, Hampton, Killingly, Plainfield, Pomfret, Putnam, Sterling, Thompson, Union and Woodstock) and other partners in a regional collaborative launched the *WriteSteps School Walking Initiative* pilot project to add a daily walk at school in the Plainfield School System. During walks, students discussed an assigned topic each day and wrote about it upon returning to the classroom. The no-cost program has decreased reports of disciplinary problems, improved test scores, and enhanced physical activity for both students and staff.
- The Eastern Highlands Health District (serving Andover, Ashford, Bolton, Chaplin, Columbia, Coventry, Mansfield, Scotland, Tolland and Willington) helped implement *Safe Routes to Schools* programs, which examine conditions around schools and conduct projects and activities that work to improve safety and accessibility and reduce traffic and air pollution in the vicinity of schools. As a result, these programs help make bicycling and walking to school safer and more appealing transportation choices, thus encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.
- The Norwalk Department of Health, in collaboration with the Norwalk Department of Recreation and Parks, secured an obesity prevention grant to transform an overgrown and unused property into Fodor Farm Community Garden. Each year, families and community groups register for use of 220 garden plots. Fodor Farm also offers educational sessions on cooking and nutrition and a seasonal farmers' market. Healthy food access can significantly combat obesity.

We applaud Raised Bill 6525's multi-sector approach in creating a task force to address this important topic. But any such task force should leverage the substantial expertise and experience of the public health community in combatting childhood obesity. In particular, any newly created task force should capitalize on the institutional memory of those who served on the now-dormant Connecticut Childhood Obesity Council, which included an epidemiologist, health education experts, and other public health professionals. Please amend bill language to include state and local governmental public health representation on the proposed task force.

Thank you for your consideration. CADH is a nonprofit organization comprised of Connecticut's 71 local health departments and districts. Local health directors are the statutory agents of the Commissioner of Public Health and are critical providers of essential public health services at the local level in Connecticut.