

**Public Comments of the National Association of Social Workers
To the Task Force on Childhood Obesity
March 26, 2010**

On behalf of our 145,000 members, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is pleased to submit comments to the Task Force on Childhood Obesity, to assist in developing the national action plan to solve the challenge of childhood obesity within a generation.

NASW has long advocated for efforts to prevent and treat childhood obesity. Social workers across the nation address this issue daily, whether in individual practice with children and families, or within school systems, health care settings, community-based organizations or state agencies. NASW applauds the creation of the Task Force, whose agenda is ambitious but urgent. If left unaddressed, the crisis of childhood obesity will translate into a steeper trajectory for our nation's escalating health care costs. Moreover, the scope of childhood obesity in the U.S. portends the very real possibility of reduced life expectancy and diminished quality of life, as today's children struggle with obesity-related illnesses as adults.

What concrete, specific actionable recommendations or guidelines would help parents reduce the risk that their child will become overweight or obese?

NASW supports universal adoption of the evidence-based "5-2-1-0" message in all health encounters with children and parents. Developed by pediatric obesity experts, this simple, health education message is as follows:

- Five fruits and vegetables daily
- No more than two hours of screen time daily (and no TV in rooms where children sleep)
- At least one hour of physical activity daily
- Zero sugar-sweetened beverages

Specifically with regard to objective 2 (healthier food in schools): What are the most promising steps that can be pursued by the Federal, State, and local governments, schools, communities, the private sector, and parents to ensure that children are eating healthy food in schools and child care settings?

To promote healthy eating within school settings, NASW recommends:

- **Eliminating unhealthy competitive foods from the school environment.** Unhealthy competitive foods (foods sold à la carte in school cafeterias and in vending machines and snack bars, which are generally exempt from nutrition standards) should be eliminated from schools and the sale of healthy snack and beverage choices for students should be promoted.
- **Restricting advertising.** State and local governments should restrict or eliminate outdoor advertising for high-calorie, low nutrient foods near schools.

- **Revamping the USDA school breakfast and lunch programs.** USDA continues to provide high-fat commodities such as whole milk, sweetened flavored milk, and cheese to children through the school breakfast and lunch programs. Since most school-aged children are not meeting the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, especially recommendations for total fat, saturated fat, sodium, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, it is critically important that USDA continue to make improvements and work with states and local school districts to ensure that all components of school meals – including USDA foods– are of the highest nutritional quality.
- **Revamping U.S. agricultural policy:** Current U.S agricultural policy promotes the production of cheap sugars and refined grains, while doing little to encourage production of fruits and vegetables. USDA should revisit the commodity support program, in light of the nation’s obesity crisis.

What are the key unanswered research questions that need to be answered with regard to solving childhood obesity and how should the Federal Government, academia, and other research organizations target their scarce resources on these areas of research?

The strong connection between low socioeconomic status and obesity bodes ill for overweight children living in poverty, as the stigmatization and discrimination they may face as obese adults may further diminish their occupational and educational opportunities. NASW recommends that more research be conducted to study the psychological as well as social effects of obesity on children. Social work researchers are ideal candidates for these projects. Social work researchers study the strengths, needs, and inter-relationships of individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, and social institutions and provide evidence for improved service delivery and public policies.

Specifically with regard to Objective 3 (access to healthy, affordable food): What are the biggest challenges to enhancing access to healthy and affordable food in communities across America, and what are the most promising strategies to overcome these challenges?

The scourge of childhood obesity is falling disproportionately on minority children and children living in poverty. One of the biggest challenges in accessing healthy and affordable foods in low-income communities is the lack of full-service supermarkets. High-poverty, inner-city communities are often deemed “food deserts” because of the limited access to nutritious food. The lack of full-service supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods means that meal options are too often reduced to unhealthy – and often expensive - fast food outlets or convenience stores.

To address this challenge, NASW recommends:

- **Incentivizing healthy food.** Local and state governments should offer incentives for supermarkets and farmers’ markets to open in “food desert” communities.
- **Enacting restrictive zoning.** Local governments should consider restrictive zoning for fast food outlets.

Specifically with regard to objective 4 (physical activity): What steps can be taken to improve quality physical education and expand opportunities for physical activity during the school day, in local communities and neighborhoods, and in outdoor activities and other recreational settings?

Research shows that physical activity is one of the strongest predictors of good emotional and physical health. African American and Hispanic children are more likely than White children to live in unsafe neighborhoods with inadequate recreational opportunities. Living in communities without safe recreational opportunities—like parks, playgrounds or even safe streets or sidewalks, which more affluent communities take for granted – means less opportunity for kids to burn calories through exercise.

To address this challenge, NASW recommends:

- **Requiring daily physical education (PE) for all students.** Studies consistently show that more time in PE and other school-based physical activity improves student well-being and can, in certain cases, lead to improved grades and standardized test scores.
- Federal grants to state and local governments that promote the development of:
 - **Safe recreational opportunities**, such as bike paths, sidewalks, and parks.
 - **Innovative after-school programming.** Girls in particular need more opportunities to participate in formal and informal physical activity in supportive environments where they do not feel self-conscious about their looks or ability, where they can choose the activities they want, and be active in ways that make them comfortable.

What other input should the Task Force consider in writing the report?

On March 23, President Obama signed the landmark health care reform bill into law. Within the bill, 25 million dollars was appropriated for the next five years for demonstration projects to develop a comprehensive and systematic model for reducing childhood obesity. In addition, the bill provides grants to promote the community health workforce. With their holistic perspective, social workers understand the multifaceted nature of childhood obesity and that an array of interventions - at the individual, community and national policy levels – will be needed to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic. NASW recommends that social workers be considered when the demonstration projects are developed and the grants awarded.