

## **COMMUNITY MAKEOVER FUNDS: CONTROLLING HEALTH CARE COSTS THROUGH HEALTHY COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS**

The Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments strongly supports Governor Schwarzenegger’s proposal to invest specific monies towards obesity prevention as a fundamental element of healthcare reform. As the legislature develops a concrete plan for providing all Californians with high-quality, culturally competent care, devoting resources towards prevention is the best prescription for reducing overall demand and future expenditures for health care services. Currently, 60% of health care expenditures in California go to treat individuals with multiple chronic conditions including diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and asthma.<sup>1</sup> Good nutrition and regular physical activity, along with not smoking, are low-cost, low-tech ways to prevent these diseases and reduce health care needs of those who already have them. At the clinical level, health care expansion provides an important opportunity to provide comprehensive coverage for preventive care and chronic disease management, including services provided by trained peer counselors and promotoras. Further, health care facilities can be modified to be consistent with health recommendations through measures such as offering healthy foods and providing breastfeeding support in an environment free from infant formula marketing. At the community level, disease prevention efforts can be maximized by attention to improving community environments to support healthy behaviors.

Numerous researchers and expert panels including the Institute of Medicine and the American Academy of Pediatrics have reached similar conclusions -- that the worsening of eating and physical activity habits over the last few decades is primarily attributed to adverse environmental factors.<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup> Therefore, successfully changing unhealthy behaviors requires a comprehensive approach that supports not only educational and clinical efforts, but strong measures to improve community environments in order to make healthy choices easy and affordable.<sup>7</sup> Through the leadership of the legislature and the Governor, California has been leading the nation in adopting policies that foster healthy eating and physical activity environments. Health care reform provides an opportunity to strengthen this investment. There are a growing number of model efforts in communities across California that can both inform and benefit from a “Community Makeover” program. Environmental and policy changes achieve the greatest leverage for changing norms and improving health outcomes – small investments get great health dividends. We recommend that at minimum the proposed \$52 million for obesity prevention be allocated to support healthy community environments, via a Community Makeovers Fund.

### **ESTABLISH A COMMUNITY MAKEOVERS FUND**

The Community Makeovers Fund for local assistance grants would provide a unique resource to support local coalition infrastructure and intergovernmental collaboration, along with modest infrastructure investments, devoted to improving access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities. These funds should be directed to supporting communities with the greatest needs especially communities of color and communities with disproportionately high rates of poverty. Spending guidelines should be flexible enough to address environmental and policy issues of most concern to a particular community.

## **Criteria for High Need Communities**

High-need communities include but are not limited to:

- Communities with higher rates of diseases or conditions related to community environments including but not limited to asthma and respiratory disease, diabetes, coronary heart disease, and obesity;
- Communities with disproportionately fewer resources for community health, including but not limited to safe and accessible parks, schools, public transit, bicycle and pedestrian access and healthy, affordable retail food outlets;
- Communities of color and low-income communities.

## **RECOMMENDED ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY MAKEOVER INITIATIVES**

### **Neighborhoods**

Foster neighborhoods that encourage walking, bicycling and recreational activity and offer a variety of affordable, widely visible healthy food options by:

- Supporting healthy food retail in underserved areas by establishing grocery stores, farmers markets, and farm stands, and improving options provided by small stores, restaurants, and street vendors;
- Adopting and implementing complete streets policies to provide for the safe and convenient travel of all users of the roadway including pedestrians, bicyclists, users of public transit, motorists, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities;
- Ensuring full and equitable access to community and neighborhood parks, playgrounds, open space, and recreational facilities;
- Adequately funding physical activity programming for children, adults and seniors that is easily accessible;
- Developing infrastructure for distributing fresh local farm products to retail stores, government institutions, schools, hospitals, worksites and other facilities;
- Fostering safe communities, playgrounds and parks through community-driven, comprehensive violence prevention efforts;
- Analyzing the impact of land use and transportation system planning on public health.

### **Healthy worksites**

Adopt model standards for government worksites and provide incentives to businesses that support employee health through measures such as:

- Offering affordable, healthy foods and beverages in vending machines and cafeterias;
- Encouraging daily physical activity breaks;
- Providing lactation accommodation;
- Providing wellness benefits and other incentives for employees to engage in healthy eating, regular physical activity, and other healthy behaviors;
- Featuring clean, well-lit stairs, walking paths, or other locations for physical activity;
- Offering incentives for employees to bicycle or take public transit to work.

### **Children's Environments**

Create pre-school, child care, school and after school environments that reinforce health education messages and support healthy choices through measures such as

- Providing quality physical education and/or age-appropriate activities that engage children in a minimum of 30 minutes of daily physical activity and that cultivate physically active lifestyles;

- Improving the nutritional quality of meals by incorporating more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and legumes and limiting fat, sodium, and sweeteners;
- Implementing and enforcing healthy food and beverage standards, such as the Institute of Medicine Nutrition Standards for Food in Schools, for all foods and beverages sold in competition with federally reimbursable meals and snacks;
- Eliminating the advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and youth in preschool;
- Supporting the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods from regional farms and ranches.

### **Media campaigns**

The Governor has proposed dedicating funds to a media campaign to promote healthy lifestyles. Media campaigns need to be carefully focused in order to have an impact on behavior. The Institute of Medicine report *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, emphasized that “media-centered efforts must be closely linked with complementary efforts elsewhere in pursuit of the same objectives.”<sup>8</sup> For example, using media to promote walking to school as a complement to efforts to create safe routes to school can have a far greater impact than a general message promoting regular physical activity. We recommend that any media campaign adopt one or more of the following strategies:

- Focusing on raising awareness about the community conditions that support healthy choices as a way to support local community makeover efforts;
- Promoting behaviors or strategies directly related to environmental change initiatives occurring around the state (e.g. safe routes to school, visiting Farmers Markets, increasing exclusive breastfeeding, or implementing state school nutrition standards);
- Revealing industry practices that negatively impact behavior, such as targeted marketing of unhealthy foods and sedentary screen time to children.

### **Technical Assistance and Oversight**

In order to maximize the impact, community makeover efforts need to be supported and improved through:

- Establishing a mechanism for public accountability and engaging Californians’ expertise to inform the Community Makeover initiative;
- Providing high-quality training and technical support for localities;
- Instituting a State intergovernmental task force to ensure that every cabinet member sets goals and takes action to address chronic disease prevention;
- Developing and implementing common surveillance measures to track progress in improving community environments in California.

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<sup>1</sup> California HealthCare Foundation, Chronic Disease, 2006, www.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Medicine. (2005) *Preventing childhood obesity: Health in the balance*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>3</sup> Nestle M. (Sept 2005). Editorial. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95 (9), 1497-1499.

<sup>4</sup> Ebbeling, C.B., Pawlak, D.B., Ludwig, D. S. Childhood obesity: public-health crisis, common sense cure. *The Lancet* 2002, 360:473-482.

<sup>5</sup> Brownell, K.D., Horgen, K.H. (2004). *Food fight: The inside story of the food industry, America’s obesity crisis & what we can do about it*. New York: McGraw Hill.

<sup>6</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics...

<sup>7</sup> Institute of Medicine. (2005) *Preventing childhood obesity: Health in the balance*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

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<sup>8</sup> Institute of Medicine. (2005) *Preventing childhood obesity: Health in the balance*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.