



## Nutrition and Physical Activity in New York City: Defining a Common Policy Agenda

PHANYC *Agenda for a Healthy New York*

Report 3 June 2005



### What is the Agenda for a Healthy New York?

The *Agenda for a Healthy New York* seeks to identify policy goals that will improve the health of New York City residents by 2010, and then advocate for the implementation of these policies. Its premise is that a healthy New York requires effective schools, adequate housing, employment opportunities, access to good health care, a clean environment, safe neighborhoods, and the potential for all residents to participate in the political process. This vision of a healthy city has been a basic goal of public health for more than 150 years; the *Agenda* translates this aim into a specific plan for today's city.

The *Agenda* is a project of the Public Health Association of New York City (PHANYC), one of the oldest and largest affiliates of the American Public Health Association. Throughout the year, we will be holding forums on important public health issues, circulating reports on current public health challenges facing NYC, and preparing specific public health policy objectives for the city. Areas that we address include: Education and Health (Report 1), Reproductive and Sexual Health (Report 2), Nutrition and Physical Activity (this report), Environment and Health, Health Care, and Mental Health and Substance Abuse. We will work closely with other public health, advocacy and professional organizations, with city government and elected officials and with citizens. In the coming months, we will use the *Agenda* to encourage public discussion of the public health issues for the 2005 city and 2006 state elections. The *Agenda for a Healthy New York* is funded in part by the New York Community Trust. This report focuses on nutrition and physical activity.



In 2003, 53% of NYC adults (2.8 million people) were overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup>



21% of NYC kindergarten children are obese.<sup>1</sup>



26% of NYC adults reported no physical activity in the past month and only 30% of exercised most days of the week.<sup>1</sup>



59% of NYC high school children watched 3 or more hours of TV on a school day.<sup>2</sup>

**“Obesity in kids is now epidemic in the United States.”**

*Carol Torgan, NIH (2002)*

### The Importance of Nutrition and Physical Activity for Good Health

Food is one of the most basic human needs for survival. Available, affordable nutritious food is critical for the health and well-being of all Americans. Paradoxically, hunger and lack of food can lead to malnutrition with severe physical and mental repercussions extending into later life, while too much food, especially energy-dense but low quality food, can lead to problems of obesity and related health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease beginning much earlier in life.

The persistence of hunger and food insecurity and the rising epidemic of obesity, especially in our children, are major concerns for public health professionals. The continuing existence of these two conditions may be due in part to current food policies that are not coordinated and do not meet the health needs of many in our population. This report is part of a continuing effort to bring together active and committed groups who are working to improve health through better nutrition and physical activity and to formulate a policy agenda for the New York City election in 2005 and the New York State election in 2006.

**Poor diet and physical inactivity are leading causes of death in the United States, ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> only to tobacco use.**

## **Hunger and Food Insecurity are Major Public Health Issues**

Community food security has been defined as “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and social justice.”<sup>3</sup> In 2003, 10% of all households in New York State were identified as food insecure, with one-third of those households experiencing the more acute condition of hunger.<sup>4</sup> Lack of adequate nutritious food has immediate physical and mental health consequences, and also increases risk of long-term degenerative and chronic diseases.

Those especially at risk for food insecurity and hunger include families living at or below the poverty level, pregnant women, young children and the elderly. Malnutrition can be especially severe in young children, resulting in stunted physical growth, iron-deficiency anemia, developmental and behavioral disturbances, inability to concentrate in school and mental retardation.<sup>5</sup> As the need for building community food security increases, funds for public food assistance programs such as the Food Stamp Program and WIC, established to provide resources to supplement people's ability to access food, are being cut. In New York City, the demand for emergency food increased by 26% between 2002 and 2003, placing an enormous burden on private emergency food providers: food banks and food pantries, whose resources were already strained.<sup>6</sup> Hunger and food security must be addressed as a major public health issue for New York City and State.

## **Obesity and Related Health Conditions Have Reached Epidemic Proportions**

According to the World Health Organization and expert opinion in the US, diet and physical activity are strongly related to the development of obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, dental disease, and osteoporosis.<sup>7</sup> In January 2005, the US Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture released the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, recommending increased intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods because such dietary patterns have been associated with reduced risk of obesity and related conditions.<sup>8</sup> The 2005 *Dietary Guidelines* also recommend an hour of daily physical activity.

Most Americans do not come close to meeting these diet or physical activity recommendations. In New York City, healthy foods like fruits and vegetables are less available and more expensive in some neighborhoods than others.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, some neighborhoods are less safe for walking or playing outside than others.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, rates of obesity and related chronic diseases are higher in those neighborhoods, which are often lower-income communities of color.<sup>1</sup> To reduce obesity and related conditions like diabetes and heart disease, especially among children and underserved populations, New York City and State must increase the availability and affordability of healthful foods, and increase opportunities for physical activity in all communities and neighborhoods in New York City.

● In 2001, diabetes mortality was almost three times higher for Black New Yorkers than for White New Yorkers.<sup>10</sup>

● People with income levels under \$25,000 are less likely to exercise: 31% whites, 35% Blacks and 38% Hispanics did not exercise in the last month.<sup>10</sup>

● Overall, annual medical costs for an obese person are about 37.7% more, or \$732 higher, than the costs for someone of normal weight.<sup>11</sup>

● The prevalence of obesity in the U.S. has doubled in adults and tripled in children in the last two decades.<sup>12,13</sup>

● Ten percent of all households in New York State are food insecure.<sup>4</sup>



# By 2010, New York City should:

1. **Increase the availability and affordability of healthful foods including fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low fat dairy products**
2. **Increase physical activity opportunities**
3. **Improve nutrition and physical activity in schools**
4. **Reduce food insecurity in vulnerable/underserved populations**
5. **Reduce obesity and related health conditions**

## POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS HERE IN NYC:

### Encourage the NYC Department of Education to:

- Increase the number of schools in NYC that offer comprehensive health education and health promotion programs, including programs on nutrition and food systems, health, and physical education
- Implement the new federal law mandating Health and Nutrition Committees in schools
- Integrate physical activity in schools before, during and after school hours

### Encourage the NYC Office of School Food to:

- Improve the process of distribution of fresh foods to schools
- Work with food service providers to improve meals provided in schools
- Increase availability of 1% milk, water and whole wheat bread in schools
- Eliminate soda and candy vending machines from schools

### Encourage the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to:

- Increase the selection of healthy foods in bodegas/convenience stores
- Encourage restaurants to offer healthy choices
- Require fast food restaurants to post nutritional information
- Assist school-based health clinics to assess and reduce childhood obesity

### Encourage the NYC Economic Development Corporation to:

- Increase the number of affordable supermarkets that offer high quality healthful foods in low-income areas
- Create incentives for local food processing
- Support the development of a NYC Wholesale Farmers' Market

### Encourage the NYC Department of Consumer Affairs:

- Improve food labels and educational content of food marketing
- Limit inappropriate food advertising to children

### Encourage the NYC Department for the Aging to:

- Create more opportunities for nutrition education and healthful food preparation through the faith-based communities, community senior centers and other places that serve food

### Encourage the NYC Parks Department to:

- Improve playgrounds, walking and recreational areas
- Use public spaces for farmers' markets, community gardens, and summer food program sites

### Encourage the NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development to:

- Plan areas for community gardens and congregate food preparation in future low-income housing developments

### Encourage the NYC Human Resources Administration to:

- Facilitate enrollment for those eligible for the Food Stamp Program by simplifying the application form and making them more available
- Decrease the number of income reporting requirement times and offer extended office hours for working people

**Eating well and being physically active takes more than just willpower.**

We need programs and policies that make healthy food more available, that disclose the calorie content of restaurant foods, and that teach people how to make healthy eating easier. . . more needs to be done to help people who want to eat well and prevent diet-related disease.

*~Margo Wootan,  
Center For Science in  
the Public Interest.*

**Do you have other ideas?  
WE WANT YOUR SUGGESTIONS!**

# He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything. ~Arabian Proverb

## Resource Organizations

### In New York City:

- Children's Defense Fund
- City Harvest
- Food Bank for NYC
- FoodChange
- Hunger Action Network of New York State
- Just Food
- NYC Coalition Against Hunger
- NYC Council on the Environment
- NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- NYC Department of Education
- NYC Office of School Food
- NYC Nutrition Education Network (NYCNEN)
- Public Health Association of NYC
- Transportation Alternatives
- United Way
- World Hunger Year

### At the State level:

- NY State Department of Agriculture and Markets
- NY State Department of Education
- NY State Department of Health
- NY State Office of Minority Health
- NY State WIC Program

### At the National level:

- CDC Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity
- Center for Science in the Public Interest
- Community Food Security Coalition
- Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)
- National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity
- National Institutes of Health
- Second Harvest
- USDA Economic Research Service
- USDA Food and Nutrition Service

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