



PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK CITY

1710 First Avenue • Suite 282 • New York, New York 10128

tel: 212-722-1063 • fax: 212-722-0726 • email: info@phanyc.org • www.phanyc.org

PHANYC Statement for City Council Health Committee Oversight Hearing, “New York City’s Response to the Obesity Epidemic”

Good afternoon. My name is Amy Schwartz, and I am the Executive Director of the Public Health Association of New York City (PHANYC), one of the oldest and largest affiliates of the American Public Health Association, the national organization of public health professionals. This year, PHANYC celebrates its 70th anniversary of advocating for improved health in New York City.

Introduction

First, I’d like to thank the City Council Health Committee for holding this Oversight Hearing on the city’s response to such a critical public health problem, and for allowing PHANYC this opportunity to offer recommendations for addressing the obesity epidemic. As public health professionals, we are greatly concerned that the obesity epidemic and the associated rise in diabetes type 2 and other chronic medical and life-threatening medical conditions threaten public health, social justice, economic productivity, and the capacity of the city’s hospitals and social service agencies to respond to the city’s current and emerging health needs. We fear that absent more determined intervention, diabetes will pose as severe a threat to New York City’s well-being in the next decades as the HIV epidemic did in the previous two decades.

Let me first start with some basic statistics from the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which found that in 2003, 53% of NYC adults (2.8 million people) were overweight or obese. Nearly one-quarter, or 21% of NYC kindergarten children are obese. Contributing to the problem, NYCDOH found that 26% of NYC adults reported no physical activity in the past month and only 30% exercised most days of the week. In addition, 59% of NYC high school children watched 3 or more hours of TV on a school day. Disturbingly, another study found that 40% of the children in the city’s Head Start programs were overweight or obese.

In some ways, the solutions to our obesity epidemic are simple. Nutritionists tell us to lose weight people need to eat less unhealthy high fat, high sugar, high calorie and low nutrient foods and exercise more. Even small changes in eating and exercise will bring about changes. But we all know that achieving these simple changes is not so easy, in part because we have allowed an environment that supports unhealthy eating and physical inactivity to flourish. In PHANYC’s viewpoint, the single most important goal is to use city government as a catalyst to change policies that contribute to obesity and support policy changes that make it easier for New Yorkers to eat less and move more. More specifically, we need policies that make healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain products and low fat dairy products more affordable and accessible and high fat, high sugar, low nutrient foods less available. We also need policies that make it easier for all New Yorkers to find safe, affordable places for physical activity. Only when city policy makes it easy for people to choose health is it fair to ask people to make the individual changes needed to improve health.

PHANYC is especially concerned about the disproportionate impact of obesity on lower income neighborhoods and on Blacks and Latinos. In these neighborhoods, healthy foods like fruits and

vegetables are less available, of poorer quality and more expensive. High fat, low nutrient foods are often more available and sometimes less expensive than healthier choices. Similarly, these communities are less safe for walking or playing outside, and their parks are less safe and poorly-maintained. Any solution to the city's obesity problems must have as its goal reducing this disproportionate impact of obesity so that all New Yorkers have the same opportunities for health. To do less violates basic American standards of justice and equality.

To address the epidemics of obesity and diabetes, PHANYC believes that New York City can act now to increase the availability of healthy foods and safe places for physical activity. We recommend that:

1) The NYC Department of Education can:

- 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
- Enforce existing New York State mandates for physical activity in schools

2) The NYC Office of School Food can:

- 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

3) The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene can:

- Provide bodegas and convenience stores with incentives to increase the selection of healthy foods
- 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

4) The NYC Economic Development Corporation can:

- 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 and increase number of farmer's markets in lower income neighborhoods

5) The NYC Department of Consumer Affairs can:

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

6) The NYC Department for the Aging can:

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

7) The NYC Parks Department to:

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

8) The NYC Human Resources Administration can:

- 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

9) The Mayor's Office can:

- End the NYC contract with Snapple that encourages our children to drink high sugar low nutrient beverages
- Propose a tax on high sugar low nutrient beverages that can support nutrition education
- Establish an independent commission to plan a comprehensive citywide response to obesity and diabetes

Conclusion

In conclusion, PHANYC believes New York City can do better. We applaud the proposal put forth by Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Councilman Eric Gioia to create a coordinated city food system agency. In the next few months, we will be working with local health, nutrition, school and other groups to identify programmatic and policy priorities to address the epidemics of obesity, diabetes and physical inactivity in our boroughs. We will issue a report on actions New York City can take to get New York moving more. And in October, we will sponsor a major citywide conference designed to bring together all those concerned about obesity and diabetes to develop a citywide policy agenda to reduce these problems. The policy changes we recommend here are the first steps towards a concerted effort across the multiple government agencies, organizations and businesses to take on the problem of obesity and its associated complications. PHANYC looks forward to being part of this effort. Thank you.

End

June 20, 2006

For more information, contact Amy J. Schwartz, Executive Director, PHANYC at 212-722-1063 or info@phanyc.org or Nicholas Freudenberg, President, PHANYC and Distinguished Professor of Public Health, Hunter College, CUNY at 212-481-4363 or nfreuden@hunter.cuny.edu.