

CHAIRMAN FRANK PALLONE, JR.

HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

“Innovations in Addressing Childhood Obesity”

OPENING STATEMENT

December 16, 2009

Good morning. Today the Subcommittee is meeting to discuss “Innovations in Addressing Childhood Obesity”, a topic I know is of interest to many members of this committee and of the House of Representatives.

Childhood obesity is a huge public health problem in this country that puts millions of American children at risk. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that over the last 3 decades, the rates of childhood obesity have been skyrocketing. In every age category, we have seen at least a doubling, and in some age groups a tripling, in the numbers of children who are classified as obese. In addition, there are

millions more who are just at the cusp and are in danger of becoming obese as well.

The rates are the worst among minority populations. According to the CDC, Hispanic boys and African American girls have the highest rates of obesity with 22.1% of Hispanic boys and 27.7% of African American girls classified as obese. And though the rates are starting to level off, there are still too many children in this country who are dangerously overweight.

Childhood obesity can lead to health problems that 30 years ago were rarely seen in children. A report conducted by the Trust for Americas Health in 2009 highlighted that more and more children are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnea, joint problems and depression to name just a few. These children are likely to continue having health problems as they age into adulthood. Some experts have even predicted that

if the trends in childhood obesity continue, we will for the first time see a generation that lives sicker and dies earlier than their parents. Regardless, we know that if left unaddressed, this epidemic alone has the potential to cripple our health care system.

The price of obesity in this country is unsustainable. Adult obesity is estimated to cost our nation \$147 billion per year and childhood obesity adds another \$14 billion to that price tag. Studies have shown that up to 80% of obese children will become obese adults and as we watch the number of obese children skyrocket, the cost to our nation will not only increase, but an obese and unhealthy nation may very well bring about an unproductive nation.

In New Jersey, 31% of our children are clinically overweight. That is nearly 7% higher than the rate of adult obesity. I am worried that at a time of economic recession and high

unemployment rates, many of these children will be less likely to have access to healthier, more expensive foods. Meanwhile, safety-net health programs are continuously overextended as the numbers of uninsured and underinsured continue to grow, posing further risk to children who may not be receiving the medical care they need.

There are many factors that contribute to our rising rates of obesity. Personal habits definitely play some part, but many studies have been able to link obesity to unsafe neighborhoods, less exercise opportunities, and lack of access to healthy foods. Our health care system also plays some part, with millions of children living without preventative health services, such as nutrition counseling and screening for obesity-related diseases. These are all things that we as a nation can work together to address so that we can eventually reverse the trends of childhood obesity.

This is why I am holding this hearing today. I look forward to hearing from all of our witnesses about the innovative work they are doing to address childhood obesity, to hear about how we at the federal level can play a part in curbing this trend, and to learn more about what makes obesity interventions successful. I am also eager to hear a bit about where we need to focus our efforts over the next 10 years.

I would like to welcome you all today. I know that many of you are involved in very exciting and cutting edge work and I look forward to hearing your testimony. I would like to now recognize Mr. Deal for an opening statement.