

## Government's role in promoting physical activity and healthy eating

Governments have demonstrated and “declared their support of efforts to maintain and improve America’s health.”<sup>1</sup> With obesity and diabetes rates at all time highs, it is critical to address their root causes—physical inactivity and unhealthy eating. What people eat and whether or not they are active is more than a matter of individual responsibility. Issues of governmental concern such as community design, neighborhood safety, and access to affordable fresh foods and quality health care influence activity and eating patterns.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Health problems are taking a terrible toll on communities with limited resources and government provides the “safety-net” for those who have access to the fewest resources. To make progress towards the elimination of racial, ethnic and economic health disparities, government must direct resources to communities in greatest need. Three key approaches that government can take to shape the eating and activity environment are delineated below, including key actions to improve communities most adversely affected by negative health outcomes.

### **1. Government has responsibility to disseminate information about the community-level barriers and solutions to improve eating and activity.**

Through training and information dissemination, government raises awareness about health risks and shapes opinions about the best way to alter poor eating and sedentary lifestyles. Government can correct the misperception that the obesity epidemic is simply a matter of individual behavior or genetics. By raising public and professional understanding of the community-level barriers and solutions to support healthy eating and activity, government can play a leadership role in building support for public policies that transform neighborhoods.

#### **Government Actions:**

- Ensure all health/public health staff is trained and knowledgeable about factors that impact eating and activity (e.g., community walkability, food access, school food). Incorporate training opportunities into the work of public health employees.
- Review existing trainings that staff use with community members and ensure that multiple causes of unhealthy eating and inactivity are explored.
- Train other key agencies, elected officials and their staff about ways to prevent poor eating and inactivity that go beyond providing messages of individual responsibility.
- Use existing media to deliver a broader, more complete message to the community about how issues such as safety, prevalence of fast-food outlets and lack of fresh foods contribute to unhealthy eating and inactivity.
- Respond to news stories and encourage multi-faceted solutions; emphasize that there is no magic bullet.
- Serve as spokespeople/experts to the media—highlight community and policy solutions.
- Provide training and outreach to community organizations about the role of the environment. Ensure that CBO’s that provide services in low-income communities understand the need to address community barriers and advocate for solutions.

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**STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS:** The California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit) ■ California Center for Public Health Advocacy ■ California Food Policy Advocates ■ California Pan Ethnic Health Network ■ California Project LEAN ■ California WIC Association ■ Child Care Food Program Roundtable ■ Latino Health Access ■ Prevention Institute ■ Samuels & Associates, Inc

## 2. Government should model 'healthy-fit' workplace

Government needs to practice what it preaches and demonstrate the possibility of creating a better workplace environment that promotes healthy eating and activity. Government's commitment to safer workplaces and tobacco-free workplaces has resulted in reduced occupational injuries and environmental exposure to tobacco.<sup>5</sup> Government has the potential to have similar success in improving workplace physical activity and nutrition. Government is a major employer and when it reduces workplace barriers to healthy eating and activity, it demonstrates that health promotion in the workplace is feasible. Like other workplaces, government can benefit from improved facilities and employee wellness/benefit programs in the form of significant annual savings, reduced health care claims, increased morale, reduced absenteeism, and decreased costs of claims per employee-participant.<sup>6</sup>

### Government Actions:

- Institute a food policy, as in Contra Costa County, which requires that healthy options be available whenever food or drinks are served at government worksites or functions.<sup>7</sup>
- Establish nutrition standards for vending machines.
- Implement activity breaks for meetings that are longer than one hour.
- Provide open, attractive stairways, bike racks, lockers, and showers to encourage activity.
- Reimburse employees for preventive health and wellness services.
- Encourage or require contractors to adopt similar "healthy-fit" workplace policies.

## 3. Adopt policies and regulations that support healthy eating and activity environments.

Many government decisions impact food and activity choices and shape the environment for eating and activity. Policies, subsidies and incentives have far-reaching impacts on the current environment and its contribution to the "obesity epidemic." Policies and practices related to physical activity and nutrition cut across numerous departments including agriculture, housing, transportation, planning, public health, economic development, and environmental health, which underscores the need for multi-disciplinary approaches to promoting healthy environments.

### Government Actions:

- Adopt a policy of "routine accommodation": all new road construction projects consider bike and pedestrian enhancements.
- Establish land use and zoning goals to include supermarkets in low-income, residential neighborhoods.
- Ensure public transit lines provide for direct passage from residential neighborhoods to supermarkets and other food outlets.
- Invest in retail and services in low-income communities to create destinations for pedestrian and bicycle traffic.
- Invest in supermarkets and farmers markets. Recruit supermarkets by providing financial and regulatory incentives such as identifying and preparing sites, expediting zoning and permitting or providing tax breaks.<sup>8</sup>
- Provide training and incentives to small store and restaurant owners, especially in underserved neighborhoods, to carry healthy food options (e.g., fresh produce, non-fat milk).
- Maintain playgrounds, parks and recreational facilities.
- Require or encourage any organization receiving government funds to implement policies to provide healthy food options, activity breaks and activity-friendly facilities.

*For a list of citations, please visit [www.eatbettermovemore.org](http://www.eatbettermovemore.org)*