

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

As a state, Colorado still boasts the lowest obesity rates in the nation. Similarly, fewer Metro Denver area residents are overweight or obese than most other areas of the country. However, despite our relatively low rates, obesity trends in Colorado and the Metro Denver area are moving in the wrong direction.

The percentage of adults in the Metro Denver area who were at a healthy weight has decreased by 9.2 percent between 1995 and 2005. In 2005, the percent of adults who were overweight or obese was 55 percent and almost 29 percent of Metro Denver area children ages 2 to 14 were at risk of being overweight or were overweight.

The impact of overweight and obesity on health and the cost of health are huge. They are directly linked with the three leading causes of death--heart disease, cancer and stroke--and ten of the top 15 costliest medical conditions. Obesity alone is estimated to cost Colorado \$874 million in related medical expenses.

Research shows that healthy eating and active living improves our overall health, quality of life, workplace productivity, and student performance, while lowering health costs and making the region more economically competitive.

In fact, in addition to higher academic performance, studies show that healthy eating and increased physical activity improves student test scores, increases student concentration, reduces disruptive behavior, lowers absenteeism and lowers depression.

In worksites, healthy-weight employees can decrease absenteeism and presenteeism (sick at work and under-performing), improve safety and morale, decrease health care costs (including short- and long-term disability and worker's compensation) as well as reduce the cost of replacement workers, overtime, and routine overstaffing. And, comprehensive, evidence-based worksite wellness programs produce well over a 5:1 return on every dollar invested.

That is why the Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission (MDHWC), a coalition of nearly 80 community leaders led by Lieutenant Governor Barbara O'Brien and supported by dozens of local experts, has the vision of "Making Metro Denver America's Healthiest Community"--and capturing the economic benefits of achieving our vision.

Our mission is to promote policies and programs that support a culture of healthy eating and active living in schools, worksites, and communities. We are embracing small steps to bring big change.

We do not currently have the lowest rates of overweight and obesity among metro areas. Yet, we are well-positioned to be successful given our relatively good health status, excellent infrastructure of parks and trails, our commitment to regional cooperation, and the creation of the MDHWC, including our understanding of the relationship between healthy lifestyles and the economic prosperity of the region.

In collaboration with community partners, we will improve the health and wellness of residents, help individuals and businesses save money, and reap the related economic dividends of a healthy community. We acknowledge the importance of individual responsibility, and will focus on creating an

environment and culture that supports and rewards healthy lifestyle choices--making those healthy choices the norm.

To make Metro Denver America's Healthiest Community, the commission will focus its efforts on these three initiatives:

1. Healthy Schools and Early Childhood Programs
2. Healthy Worksites
3. Healthy Communities

Those three areas directly impact:

- Over 425,000 kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in our schools, and thousands of children in pre-kindergarten early childhood education and care programs.
- Over 1.3 million employees working for nearly 80,000 government, private, and nonprofit employers, and
- Over 2.6 million metro area residents affected by state and local government policies and programs.

The following initiatives and objectives are based upon MDHWC research and evaluation of evidence-based policies and programs, and input from hundreds of people across the Metro Denver area. Progress on implementation will be monitored and shared annually with the public and key stakeholders.

### **HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS**

No Metro Denver school district currently achieves the physical activity, physical education, healthy foods, or nutrition education standards called for in our strategic plan. Our initiative includes in-school policies and programs, as well as after school and summer school activities, priorities highlighted by a recent study indicating that young children's body mass index was more likely to increase during the summer than during the school year.

Finally, in order to track our region's progress and giving our schools and

parents the data they need for appropriate wellness interventions, the plan calls for collecting and reporting aggregate-level fitness data for every school analyzed in relationship to academic performance.

*Key Objectives:*

- *Incorporate daily physical activity in all public school grades (pre-K through 12) by 2009.*
- *Incorporate physical education with qualified staff in all pre-K through 12th grades in public schools with funding appropriated by 2012.*
- *Ensure all children participate in a minimum of 50 hours of nutrition education annually by 2012.*
- *Secure sustainable resources to support and expand after school/summer activities by 2009.*
- *Establish that all food and beverages sold or otherwise available at school functions will meet or exceed criteria of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation by 2012.*
- *Promote physical activity and healthy foods in early childhood care and education programs by 2009.*
- *Collect and report aggregate-level data on students' fitness and the link to academic success in 100 percent of schools by 2012.*

### **HEALTHIEST WORKSITES**

The MDHWC will work with area employers, chambers of commerce, human resource associations and others to achieve aggressive objectives for comprehensive, evidence-based programs for larger employers, and effective healthy eating, active living wellness components for smaller employers. The plan also calls for researching and incorporating health insurance incentives as tools worksite wellness programs.

*Key Objectives:*

- *Comprehensive, evidence-based worksite wellness programs adopted by*

*all employers with 100 or more employees 2012.*

- *Worksite wellness programs incorporating incentives adopted by 2,000 small employers by 2012.*
- *Incorporate health insurance wellness incentives as part of a comprehensive worksite wellness initiative promoting healthy lifestyle choices by employees.*

## **HEALTHIEST COMMUNITIES THROUGH PUBLIC SECTOR POLICIES**

The strategic plan incorporates a broad range of objectives using public policies and programs, as well as community partnerships, to create an environment supporting physical activity and healthy eating. Research shows the link between community design, including access to parks and trails, and increased physical activity. Studies also show that local access to healthful foods, whether through farmers markets, neighborhood grocery stores and community gardens, increase healthy eating in lower income communities. The plan also focuses on the opportunity to curb the increasing costs of public health insurance, specifically Medicaid.

### **Key Objectives:**

- *Create communities that encourage more physical activity through public land use plans and policies, including the development of a transportation system supporting increased physical activity.*
- *Develop and adopt “Complete Streets” and safe intersection design standards by all local governments and the Colorado Department of Transportation by 2012.*
- *Achieve a fair allocation of state transportation system funding for infrastructure and improvements that benefit all users and support safe routes to schools.*
- *Support community driven initiatives (e.g. LiveWell Colorado partnerships) to identify community healthy eating, active*

*living priorities and implement policies and programs to achieve them.*

- *Increase availability and affordability of healthful foods, especially in underserved communities.*
- *Design and implement a pilot program that rewards participation in primary prevention and wellness programs among Medicaid enrollees in the Metro Denver area by 2009.*

## **COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING**

Sustaining the message, using our health status as an economic development tool, creating The Denver *Lifestyle Diet: A Formula for Healthy Living* as a brand, and celebrating our successes are essential to achieving our vision.

### **Key Objectives:**

- *Implement communications plan to support MDHWC strategic plan.*
- *Support other organizations launching broad-based social marketing campaigns.*
- *Hold annual awards event recognizing individuals and organizations that have led by example beginning in 2008*

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