



Testimony of the Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission
Before the Blue Ribbon Commission for Health Care Reform
March 22, 2007

The Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission (MDHWC) is a group of 78 leaders from all sectors of the community committed to making the metro Denver region America's healthiest community by promoting programs and policies that create a culture change of healthy eating and active living in schools, worksites, and communities. The commission is chaired by Lieutenant Governor Barbara O'Brien, and co-chaired by Broomfield Mayor Karen Stuart, Tom Clark, Executive Vice President of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, and Dr. James O. Hill, PhD, Director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center.

The MDHWC applauds the inclusion of the wellness and prevention criterion (criterion 10) in the Blue Ribbon Commission for Health Care Reform's request for proposals that are being submitted by community groups and individuals throughout the state. The MDHWC understands that a proposal will not meet threshold criteria if it does not include attention to wellness and prevention, and it would like to go on record as supporting this affirmative action about the importance of well and prevention in any discussions of health reform.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, chronic diseases account for not only 70 percent of deaths, but also 75 percent of health care costs in the United States. Colorado's growing population of older adults, increasing rates of obesity and the continued use of tobacco products and other risky health behaviors relate directly to the state's chronic disease rates, premature mortality and the degradation of the quality of life. Many chronic diseases are preventable and their incidence can be significantly reduced through lifestyle choices. Addressing the obesity epidemic through better nutritional choices and increased physical activity, are known to lower the risk of Type II diabetes, heart disease and even some cancers. Yet, less than two percent of our country's health care budget is spent on prevention.

The number of Colorado residents age 65 and older is expected to double in the next 20 years, increasing from approximately 520,000 residents in 2005 to over a million in 2025. Although Colorado continues to have the lowest rate of obesity among adults, our rate is increasing more rapidly than the rest of the nation. Admittedly we are starting

at a much lower level, but we can all agree we do not want to catch up and surpass other states in this race.

According to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Office of Health Disparities, Latinos, African Americans, and American Indians in Colorado are all disproportionately affected by diabetes. In its *Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Colorado 2005*, the office noted that “[d]iabetes is the ninth leading cause of death in Colorado. In Colorado, the death rate of diabetes is statistically highest in the Latino and African American populations..., at close to twice the state average rate....”

The Blue Ribbon Commission has defined its “wellness and prevention” criterion as “incentives for consumers to engage in healthy behaviors and use appropriate preventative care.” Research on worksite health initiatives continues to show that providing incentives for employees (and affected dependents) to make healthy lifestyle choices positively impacts the cost of health care and related costs, such as employee productivity.

Like this commission, the MDHWC is currently seeking public feedback on a draft of its strategic priorities that, in part, focus on the development of incentive-based worksite wellness programs and incentive-based insurance pilots to prevent chronic disease. We propose working with state government and other partners to explore the development and evaluation of a pilot program that rewards Medicaid enrollees to make healthy lifestyle choices related to exercise, nutrition and stress reduction activities. This same set of incentives will also be explored in the private market with state employees and small and large employers in the Metro Denver area.

Our efforts go beyond worksite wellness and incentive-based strategies. We know that our cultural, economic and social environment must change to support individuals in making healthy eating and active living choices. The MDHWC is committed to working with local governments to promote land use policies that make trails, parks and community gardens accessible to area residents; working with school boards, parents and principals to re-institute physical activity in our schools and providing healthy foods during the school day; and working with local residents, businesses, governments, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy and institutions of higher education and other schools to lead by example.

The MDHWC offers its support to the Blue Ribbon Commission, the state legislature and the Administration in pursuing wellness and prevention initiatives. We believe such components are critical to the success of any reform proposal as they, and the work of the MDHWC, also impact comprehensive benefits, efficiency, consumer choice and empowerment, and sustainability.