



# Metro Denver

HEALTH & WELLNESS COMMISSION  
Creating America's Healthiest Community

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Looks are deceiving: Obesity rate creeps up on Metro Denver's healthy image**

*Health & Wellness Commission reveals strategic plan to fight obesity in schools, worksites and communities*

**DENVER** –Despite having miles of trails, proximity to mountain recreation areas and a nationwide reputation for fitness, residents in the Metro Denver area are not as lean as some might think. Today, the Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission launched *MDHWC Strategic Plan: 2007-2012 – Our Recipe to Create America's Healthiest Community*, its Strategic Plan to tackle obesity in the region's schools, worksites and communities.

"We've all read that Colorado rates high on the 'healthy' scale, but our communities' waistlines are expanding at the same rate or faster as the rest of the nation – with 55 percent of Metro Denver adults overweight or obese, and one in three area children ages 2 to 14 at risk of becoming overweight," said Lt. Governor Barbara O'Brien, MDHWC Chair. "This strategic plan is our recipe to reverse this trend and reap the economic and educational rewards that come with living actively and making healthy dietary choices."

The overall strategic plan tackles obesity in Metro Denver communities through three key initiatives: Healthiest Schools and Early Childhood Programs, Healthiest Worksites, and Healthiest Communities. The key areas mirror feedback the Commission received during a series of March community meetings and an online survey.

The Commission learned that Metro Denver citizens value their health and try to stay active – nearly 70 percent of participants said they exercised every day or at least three times per week. However, nearly 60 percent of the 400 town hall and survey participants also admitted that physical activity is hindered by busy schedules and placing exercise low on a long list of priorities. Nearly 30 percent of Metro Denver respondents indicated that people simply prefer less healthful foods, and nearly a fifth said affordability also is an issue in menu selections.

In schools, the plan calls for a renewed focus on physical education and age-appropriate activity, as well as the availability of healthy foods and nutrition education.

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"Helping Metro Denver become the healthiest community in the country is a big goal," said Dr. Jim Hill, MDHWC co-chair and director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center. "Yet, we can accomplish this if everyone and every organization makes a few small lifestyle changes, including getting our kids moving and eating right in our schools."

To gauge success in meeting key objectives, the plan calls for aggregate school fitness data and analysis of fitness in relation to academic performance.

In addition to educating youngsters, the MDHWC strategic plan calls for a renewed focus on the economics of good health. Businesses seeking to locate to Metro Denver increasingly query about overall community health, due to increasing employee healthcare costs. Goals within the plan seek coordination with businesses, local governments, school districts and other employers to encourage worksite wellness programs in all sectors and organizations of all sizes. Further, the plan calls for insurance incentives for employers who implement worksite wellness programs.

From a business point of view, obesity has detrimental bottom-line costs to Metro Denver employers. According to the 2006 Hewitt Health Value Initiative, regional business health care costs average \$7,482 per employee. Like our waistlines, our health insurance costs are expanding faster than the nation as a whole: The average cost of Metro Denver employee health insurance premiums grew 9.2 percent between 2005 and 2006, compared with 7.9 percent nationwide.

"Obesity is an issue that Metro Denver and its business community can no longer ignore," said Tom Clark, co-chair of MDHWC and executive vice president of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation. "Metro Denver employers – whether they realize it or not – are in the 'business of health.' We know that everything from employee satisfaction and productivity to employer healthcare costs and economic competitiveness can be markedly improved by tackling obesity."

In communities, the Commission has several diverse goals to address the obesity epidemic. At the policy level, the plan calls for community planning that encourages physical activity, as well as safe walking environments and transportation options. Creating wellness programs for Medicaid recipients is an additional policy goal. Finally, the plan also calls for affordable healthy food choices through increased access to community gardens and farmers' markets.

“Safe, walkable environments encourage us to keep moving,” said Karen Stuart, Broomfield Mayor and MDHWC co-chair. “These steps will help all types of communities – older and newer – to encourage people to walk more, drive less and feel safe doing so. We look forward to working with our region’s schools, cities and businesses to implement ways to keep Metro Denver moving, healthy and competitive.”

The Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission will meet on Friday, May 18 to formally ratify the plan. The Commission was started in June 2006 with funding from many organizations, including the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, The Colorado Health Foundation, The Colorado Trust, Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, Pfizer and the Rose Community Foundation. Please see our Web site for a full list of sponsors, [www.mdhwc.org](http://www.mdhwc.org).

**About the Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission:**

The MDHWC is a coalition of nearly 80 community leaders from government, non-profit organizations, business, and education. The Commission’s vision is to make Metro Denver America’s Healthiest Community with a focus on promoting policies and programs that support a culture of healthy eating and active living in schools, worksites, and communities – and taking advantage of the economic benefits of being a healthy community.

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