

PRESS RELEASE FROM THE OFFICE OF SENATOR EDDIE LUCIO, JR.

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SEN. LUCIO SELECTED CHAIR OF JOINT INTERIM COMMITTEE MEMBERS ADDRESS VARIOUS NUTRITION AND HEALTH TOPICS

"I am grateful and honored for the opportunity to serve on this committee," said Chairman Lucio. "We want to lead the nation in the most physically fit and healthy children. In fact, wouldn't it be wonderful to eradicate these debilitating illnesses (type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease) entirely in children's young lives that result from poor nutrition and obesity."

The committee heard testimony from Texas Health Commissioner Eduardo Sanchez, who said that "Hispanics have a disproportionately high rate of obesity and the dramatic increases in obesity could be devastating. Our state demographer projects that the Hispanic population will grow from 33 percent today to 51 percent in 2040."

Commissioner Sanchez called this situation a scenario where multiple factors will compound the perfect storm. He added that the number of overweight Texans will roughly double by the year 2040 and nearly triple from 3.5 million today to 9.6 million in 2040. And if recent trends continue, health care costs could quadruple from \$10 billion today to as much as \$40 billion a generation from now.

Since obesity in this state's children has doubled over the last 20 years, with 35 percent of school youth now overweight or obese, Commissioner Sanchez cautioned that this generation of Texas children could be the first generation in a 100 years to face a shortened life expectancy from obesity-related illnesses.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs, as part of her revised School Nutrition Policy, is working with the beverage industry for a goal that no more than 30 percent of beverages in vending machines would be sugared and carbonated by the 2005-06 school year, in an effort to improve nutrition and curb high-calorie products for school children.

Texas Insurance Commissioner Jose Montemayor explained that obesity-attributable medical expenditures for adults in Texas spending is estimated at 6.1 percent of all medical costs, for a total of \$5.3 billion in calendar year 2003. This compares to a national average of 5.7 percent. For Medicaid, the obesity-attributable medical expenditures for adults in Texas are estimated to be 11.8 percent of all medical costs accounting for \$1.17 billion in costs in 2003.

In most cases, insurance companies will cover illnesses related to obesity but they are more reluctant to cover the cost of diet and nutrition programs, or prevention programs to help patients lose weight and improve their nutritional habits. Generally, a diagnosis of obesity is not included on a claim form because the obesity is an underlying factor of the actual illness and not the primary condition treated and billed by the provider. However, carriers are beginning to provide risk-assessment plans that help employees develop individualized programs for improving their health and some are even providing discounts on health club memberships or exercise programs.

Other testimony by Ms. Celia Hagert, senior policy analyst with the Center for Public Policy Priorities, indicated that obesity and hunger are serious public health problems, and sometimes co-exist in the same families and the same individuals. She explained that obesity can also be a symptom of poverty, which

explains why in Texas--a state with one of the highest child poverty rates--the obesity epidemic is growing faster than it is nationwide.

Low income families often buy junk or fast food, which is usually easier and cheaper to buy than nutritious food. Many face limited choices when it comes to where to buy food, like limited access to supermarkets with good selections of nutritional foods near their neighborhoods. Low-income children are more likely to live in unsafe neighborhoods, lack adequate supervisions or face health problems like asthma that make outdoor play--critical to maintaining a healthy weight--difficult.

One answer is for schools to provide nutritious breakfasts, since studies show that eating breakfast often prevents overweight and obesity. Sen. Lucio, a proponent of a universal feeding program, asserts that children who eat a nutritious breakfast daily will perform better academically and have fewer illnesses as well. Even children from higher income families often are not hungry early in the morning or their working or single-parents do not have time to prepare a healthy breakfast.

Chairman Lucio requested that the Department of Agriculture conduct a survey to see how many schools offer universal feeding programs (free for all students regardless of income); what the advantages or barriers are; best practices; and what percent of low-income students a school would consider before implementing a universal feeding program that would be cost-efficient.

Texas has the largest school breakfast program in the country, with 71 districts offering free meals and the second largest lunch program. Federal reimbursements can actually increase with more participation in these programs, and free meal program allow schools to reduce their paperwork and simplify the logistics of operating school meals programs.

If 100 percent of all eligible students participated in these programs, the state's public schools would receive an additional \$582.8 million a year. All meals are reimbursable--free, reduced or full-price. Ms. Dora Rivas, R.D., a member of the Committee, testified that when Brownsville Independent School District began a universal feeding program, the school food program was able to fund more of its needs, thus freeing up the district's money for other purposes. She is the Food Services Director there.

The next meeting of the committee will be announced by Chairman Lucio.