

Southern Obesity Summit in Nashville, Tennessee

Remarks by Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr.

Monday, November 18, 2013

Good morning. Before I begin, I want to thank Mayor Purcell and my fellow panelists for providing their expertise. Thank you also to the Texas Health Institute for inviting me to speak on this panel. I take great pride in speaking before a group of distinguished public policy professionals, all interested in making our nation more healthy and productive.

In Texas, we are in the midst of an obesity crisis and my district in the Rio Grande Valley is right in the heart of it. In my opinion, dealing with this obesity crisis requires two steps. First, we need to recognize an important truth: high levels of poverty are correlated with high levels of obesity and related health issues, and, more than anyone else, it's our children who suffer. Families with the lowest incomes have the highest percentage of children who are overweight or obese. Second, we need to make responsible public policy decisions that empower low-income people with access nutritious food sources.

I see this correlation between poverty and obesity every day. I'm saddened to report, according to recent Census data, the Brownsville-Harlingen area in my district is the poorest city in the country. McAllen, also in my Senate district, is the second poorest city. Right now, the median household income in the Valley is a little more than \$28,000 per year. Compare that to Texas as a whole, which is more than \$50,000 per year. That means more than 36 percent of the area's residents live below the poverty level, compared to 17 percent statewide.

Because higher rates of poverty are associated with poorer health care outcomes, it should come as no surprise that McAllen is also one of the most obese areas of the country. Nearly 40 percent of my constituents there suffer.

Why do we have this problem? How do people who have so little in the first place nonetheless come back from their doctors' appointments with the knowledge they somehow need to reduce what they're consuming?

Some of you may have read an article written this month in the Washington Post which painted a perfectly accurate and perfectly heartbreaking picture of the trouble poor parents face while trying to provide healthy food choices for themselves and their children. The story follows a mother of five children in McAllen, Texas named Blanca. Blanca, who herself is too sick to work because of complications from diabetes, has tried to support her family on food stamp benefits. She told the reporter that, because these benefits limit her to about \$1.50 per meal, she has to shop for "quantity over quality." What does that mean? Well, she tends to buy foods that are the least nutritious, foods heavy in preservatives, fats, salt, and refined sugar.

Blanca is already seeing the exact same health concerns she's battled pass on to her children. Her nine-year-old son shares dosages of her cholesterol medication, and her 13-year-old daughter has a darkening ring around her neck that suggests early-onset diabetes.

Blanca is in crisis, as are families across the entire state of Texas.

This is also a crisis for state and local governments. According to a mid-decade report published by Texas' Department of Agriculture, in Texas alone, by 2040 the number of overweight adults will increase by 94 percent, to more than 20 million people! By the year 2014, the cost associated with caring for this population will climb to nearly \$40 billion.

These numbers to me were shocking. In 2007, I passed legislation intended to make our state better understand the impact of obesity. My Senate Bill 556 established the Texas Interagency Obesity Council, comprised of the commissioners of Texas' education, health and human services, and agriculture agencies, with the directive to improve current health-related initiatives. I'm happy to report that the Council has inspired great agency-level work to curb obesity. For example, in Texas schools we've worked to implement student nutrition assessments and education programs, and our agriculture department has put greater emphasis on making similar nutrition programs available to communities. Still, the Council's most recent report included some grim statistics on obesity's continued costs to the state, including Texas businesses. According to the report, obesity-related costs to Texas businesses could climb to \$32.5 billion by 2030.

Now, throughout my legislative career, I've taken a special interest in studying policies that improve health outcomes for children in poverty. Children treated for obesity are three times more expensive for the health system than the average insured child. This is a problem for government because the rate of obese children under Medicaid is nearly six times higher than the rate for those with private insurance. These children are also three times more likely to be hospitalized because they are much less likely to visit the doctor.

Quite simply, if we are to engage the obesity crisis in our nation, we have to engage the poor. We need to do more to provide them, at minimum, access to healthy food options.

Unfortunately, I don't believe our federal or state governments are doing enough. In fact, I often fear that government is moving in the opposite direction. Take for example the federal government's recent inaction with regard to the food stamp program. On the first of this month, dramatic cuts to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistant Program (SNAP) went into effect. These cuts were the result of a premature end to a boost in food stamp benefits that was intended to support families hurt by the recession. But Congress voted to end the boost before the economy fully recovered! We have a country still struggling to recover and no change in the number of Americans in poverty.

These cuts are devastating. According to the Texas Food Bank Network, families saw monthly SNAP benefits decrease by an average of \$25. Still, Congress wants more cuts! The House of Representatives proposed a \$40 billion cut. A cut half that size would mean that 171,000 Texans would lose food stamp benefits.

That position is indefensible. The impact will simply be greater food insecurity across our country. As the Washington Post article I already mentioned makes clear, this just means families will look to even more unhealthy food options. A decrease in benefits will also likely put increased pressure on already stressed charities. Unfortunately, I'm not convinced that my state has done enough to support this last safety net either. This past Legislative Session, I submitted a budget rider that would have provided greater funding to Texas food banks. The funding would have grown from \$1.8 million to \$5 million. Now this budget rider made it almost all the way through the legislative process, only to be stripped in a conference committee.

I'm also not convinced Texas is doing enough to make sure nutritious foods are even present in low-income neighborhoods. Last Session, I co-authored Senate Bill 403, which would have combatted the proliferation of food deserts in Texas. Specifically, the bill proposed a public-private partnership loan program to increase the number of grocery stores in low-income areas. Small grocery retailers would be incentivized to locate in food deserts by having access to start-up grants administered by the state. According to our state's non-partisan budget office, implementing the bill would not have required any new appropriation. Still, it failed!

Combatting food deserts is vitally important in the region I represent. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in my Senate district nearly 290,000 people, or about 36.6 percent of the population, live in a food desert. Having a grocery store in a neighborhood is associated with higher fruit and vegetable consumption and lower rates of obesity. To say I was disappointed this bill did not even emerge from committee, would be an understatement.

Still, I take comfort in the legislation we have passed to combat obesity. For example, two Sessions ago I passed Senate Bill 870, which expanded the role of the Interagency Obesity Council we'd already established by requiring the creation of an Obesity Prevention Pilot program. The pilot program is designed to decrease the rate of childhood obesity in Medicaid recipients, improve the nutritional choices and increase physical activity levels of children receiving Medicaid, and achieve long-term reductions in children's Medicaid program costs incurred as a result of obesity. The benefits of this program are many. Children receive monthly visits for physical assessments and measurements, and also gain access to dietitians and exercise programs. The program is ongoing.

I am also pleased to report Texas has taken some important steps forward in increasing the availability of nutritious meals in public schools. First, I was able to pass two pieces of legislation supporting summer meal service for children. In 2011, I passed a bill which requires school districts with 50 percent or more students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals to offer food service for at least 30 days during the summer break. Many school districts now provide such a service in cooperation with nonprofit and faith-based organizations. At the time of this bill's passage, Texas' participation in the Summer Food Service Program was among the lowest in the country. As of this summer, still, only about 11 percent of children who participated in free or reduced-price meal programs statewide also took part in summer meals. But those numbers are increasing and we've seen an uptick in participation just since 2009. During the most recent Session, I passed a follow-up bill to require the state to create a five-year plan to provide school children better access to summer meals.

We also had another major legislative win this Session, passing a bill to promote children's access to a healthy breakfast. The bill provides that all schools participating in the federal free or reduced lunch program also make available a free breakfast to each of their students if 80 percent or more of those students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

This bill, Senate Bill 376, was the cornerstone of my legislative agenda because I know that few resources are as important as a nutritious breakfast. Participation in the federal School Breakfast Program has been half that of its sister program, the National School Lunch Program. Many eligible students opt not to take advantage of the program because of the stigma of receiving a free or reduced-price meal. Offering free breakfast to all students helps eliminate that problem. I truly believe we have an obligation to ensure that every Texas child has every resource they need to reach their full potential.

Now, these are some of the successes and failures my state has dealt with, but this is hardly an exhaustive discussion. Again, obesity is correlated with poverty and there are many more ways we can combat both. At every opportunity, we need to focus on alleviating the stresses of poverty if we want to eliminate overeating and poor nutrition habits.

I, for one, have so enjoyed my time here in Nashville learning about innovative ways to combat poverty. I hope I'll have a chance to work with some of this Summit's attendees in the future to make our nation a healthier place.

Thank you.