

**Testimony of  
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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to discuss the federal government's role in addressing the nation's obesity epidemic. My name is Susan Finn, and I chair the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition (ACFN).

As you have heard this morning, it is widely acknowledged that obesity is a growing concern for all Americans. According to U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona, obesity is "the fastest growing cause of illness and death in America." In fact, obesity is associated with more than 30 medical conditions, and strongly related to at least 15 of those conditions. It affects all major body systems and is more damaging to health than smoking, high levels of alcohol consumption, and poverty.

Recognizing the serious nature of this issue, in January 2003 a coalition of food and beverage companies, restaurants and related trade associations founded the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition to work toward comprehensive and achievable solutions to the nation's obesity epidemic. Today, ACFN represents more than 65 diverse organizations, including the American Association of Diabetes Educators, American Dietetic Association, American League of Bicyclists and the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. All of our members support ACFN's mission to advocate for realistic, long-term solutions to the nation's obesity epidemic. Our work is guided by an Advisory Board of 27 experts in the fields of nutrition, physical activity and behavior change.

As the chair of ACFN and a past president of American Dietetic Association, I have committed my time and efforts to working with policymakers to provide families, schools, communities, businesses, and legislators with the information and resources they need to find a healthy balance between fitness and nutrition.

Obesity is deeply rooted in complex societal, cultural, psychological and genetic trends. It has been growing quietly for decades as a side effect of progress and prosperity. Where we once expended energy in our daily jobs, today we struggle to incorporate physical activity into our hectic daily routines.

No country, industry or organization intentionally set out to make individuals or populations gain excess weight. Yet, advances in agricultural production and food technology, and efforts to improve productivity through reduced physical labor, among other things, have finally intersected, reinforcing a profound and often neglected human responsibility: to balance caloric intake and expenditure to maintain healthy weight.

The epidemic of obesity did not occur overnight or within the last decade. Rather, it has been a gathering storm driven by human progress and achievement over many decades. Understanding the contributing factors and fundamental driving forces provides a key to solving this complex and multifaceted challenge. During the past 100 years, we have learned more about food and diet than we did in the previous 1,000. We need to harness what we do know, and be honest about what we do not, to put nutritional adequacy, fitness and maintenance of healthy weight in the context of how today's consumers live.

ACFN believes, as do most experts in the field, that the ultimate solution to the obesity problem is energy balance. Energy balance is attained when calories burned equal calories consumed. In order to accomplish this seemingly simple objective, people must moderate their caloric intake to match their energy expenditure by eating less, being more physically active, or – ideally – doing both. Unfortunately, it is far easier for me to simply state this objective than it is for the majority of Americans to actually achieve it.

If we are to develop long-lasting and comprehensive obesity policy that will truly help Americans, we must address BOTH sides of the weight loss equation.

First, it is important to note that the number of calories consumed – not the SOURCE of those calories – is what is important in this equation. Of course, as a dietician, I always promote the benefits of a healthy diet that draws from all the major food groups. But it has been long recognized by the government, medical and nutrition organizations that a balanced approach to diet is the right approach, as opposed to one that characterizes certain foods as “good” or “bad.”

In fact, a study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* states that overly restrictive diets may lead to enhanced food cravings, overindulgence, eating disorders or a preoccupation with food and eating.

While we believe the federal government has an important role to play in helping to solve the nation's battle with weight, we also recognize that the federal government cannot fight this battle alone. Obesity is a complex issue involving a multitude of factors related to diet, physical activity, attitudes about nutrition and fitness, cultural and familial traditions, changing lifestyles, and even the design of our neighborhoods.

As a result, it is critical to understand that success in arresting obesity depends on the collective actions of multiple sectors of society, including federal, state and local governments, the business community – including the food and beverage industry – community organizations, families, schools, and the media.

Toward that end, ACFN is working with health professionals, educators, governments, policy makers and consumers to develop lasting approaches to reducing obesity. Specifically,

- ACFN supports providing parents, teachers and children with information and resources to assist them in making smart lifestyle choices regarding physical activity and nutrition.

- ACFN advocates for increased physical activity for every American, with an emphasis on giving students the opportunity to engage in 30 minutes of physical activity each day.
- ACFN seeks to improve the communication of nutrition information and education materials for parents, teachers and community programs.

### **The Federal Government's Role**

The government must work with all stakeholders to make the best use of existing resources and programs to ensure that obesity solutions address both diet and activity. Furthermore, these efforts must focus on programs and policies that empower consumers to make the best choices for their own personal health and nutrition goals, allowing them to find a healthy balance for life.

ACFN applauds Congress and the federal government for numerous important initiatives that seek to address these objectives. For example:

- ACFN and its members support the “Improved Nutrition and Physical Activity Act,” (“IMPACT”), passed by the Senate last December and sponsored by Majority Leader Frist and Senators Bingaman and Dodd. In the House, companion legislation is sponsored by Rep. Mary Bono and 77 other Representatives. The IMPACT bill provides much needed funding to develop innovative programs at the community level aimed at helping individuals eat right and become more active, and ultimately to improve the overall health of our nation. We are now encouraging the House of Representatives to do the same and look forward to working with you to achieve final passage of this important legislation.
- ACFN is also an enthusiastic supporter of the Congressional Fitness Caucus, chaired by Reps. Zach Wamp and Mark Udall. The bi-partisan caucus was created to boost understanding of physical activity’s benefits for good health. In fact, on June 16, ACFN will join the Congressional Fitness Caucus on the Mall for its first annual “Fitness Fair” where we will feature interactive programs to teach attendees about proper portion sizes as well as to encourage more walking on and around the Capitol grounds.
- The Carol M. White Physical Education for Progress (PEP) grants distributed by the U.S. Department of Education provide local communities with funding to improve existing physical education programs, hire and/or train staff to oversee physical activity programs, or to launch and run youth activity programs. ACFN works directly with schools and community organizations to encourage them to take advantage of this important program. This year, we were very pleased that Congress increased the appropriation from \$60 million to \$70 million, giving even more schools a chance to take advantage of federal dollars to improve the health and wellness of their students.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) “HealthierUS” program is focusing on health prevention by encouraging Americans to improve their lifestyle, including eating a balanced diet and increasing levels of physical activity. We agree with

HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson's assessment that obesity prevention will lead to significant reduction in chronic diseases ranging from diabetes to cardiovascular disease to stroke. ACFN recently responded to HHS' request for partners in the HealthierUS program, and we hope to serve as a megaphone for the very important health prevention messages HHS is trying to convey to all Americans.

- ACFN also supports the “HHS Healthy Lifestyles & Disease Prevention Initiative” which encourages American families to take small, manageable steps within their current lifestyle – versus drastic changes – to ensure effective, long-term weight control. The initiative, which includes multi-media public service advertisements and a new interactive Web site ([www.smallstep.gov](http://www.smallstep.gov)), encourages Americans to make small activity and dietary changes, such as using the stairs instead of the elevator, or taking a walk instead of watching television.
- In its recent report, the FDA Obesity Task Force proposed a “Calories Count” campaign and made several recommendations to improve consumer understanding of appropriate serving sizes. ACFN applauds the FDA's leadership in educating Americans on the importance of calorie control and recommends that FDA reinvigorate its program to educate Americans on how to read the nutrition facts panel. Through the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the food and beverage industry is supporting FDA's work by commissioning consumer research to better understand how to communicate calories, particularly with respect to single-serving sizes. The FDA's regulation for qualified health claims is another example of where FDA has stepped forward to provide consumers with accurate, non-misleading information about nutrition providing food and beverage companies with one more reason to develop new nutritious food products.
- Under the auspices of HHS and USDA, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee is currently considering revisions to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines. There is little doubt that American consumers are looking for reliable information about how to improve their health. The government has a unique opportunity to help Americans strike the right balance between nutrition and physical activity recommendations by using the best science available. ACFN believes the updated guidance should:
  - Seize the opportunity to learn from past lessons and to develop a workable, common-sense approach that fits how consumers live, work and play today.
  - Stress the importance of a nutritionally-balanced diet, physical activity and the need for Americans to moderate their food intake to match their level of physical activity.
- As the U.S. Department of Agriculture revises the current Food Guide Pyramid for the first time since 1992, there is an important opportunity to formulate guidelines that can help people improve their overall health. To meet this objective, USDA must ensure that consumers of all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds can meet the recommendations as they purchase foods and prepare meals for themselves and their families. As they currently stand, the proposed guidelines made public last fall would require such drastic changes in diet that they would be all but impossible for most Americans to follow.

Additionally, it is critical that any revisions to the food guide be made in tandem with revisions to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Nutrition Facts box. While the existing pyramid has recently become the subject of some debate, one thing is clear – it is one of the most widely recognized nutrition education tools in the marketplace. ACFN has committed to USDA to harness the power of its members to promote the new food guidance system when it is released in 2005.

- The “5-a-Day Better Health Program” is a national program to encourage all Americans to eat 5 to 9 servings of fruits and vegetables every day for good health. Established in 1991 as a partnership between the National Cancer Institute and the Produce for Better Health Foundation, 5-a-Day is the largest public-private partnership for nutrition and health in the United States and in the world. ACFN believes this partnership showcases the scope and reach a public education program can achieve with private sector involvement.

At the end of the day, any government initiative should help consumers lead healthy and active lives. The information about these efforts should also be understandable and relevant to the reality of how Americans live, work and play today and they must be achievable and relevant to each individual. I know from years of experience in the field of nutrition that broad mandates that do not acknowledge how individuals live their lives simply do not work.

We applaud the Congress and federal agencies for these many positive initiatives and we are committed to assisting in carrying them out in any way possible. But these are just a few of the many strategies that ACFN believes the country should consider. There is a great deal more that we can do.

Specifically, ACFN encourages the government to assess what gaps in research exist regarding obesity’s causes and solutions – either through projects of its own or by partnering with agencies or private-sector organizations. A thorough assessment of the deficiencies in the existing obesity research would provide the federal government and other stakeholders with a better understanding of what the next steps are in combating obesity. We know more now than in year’s past but there is still much to learn. A day doesn’t go by with out a news story about the latest diet revolution. Consumers are confused, and rightfully so.

### **Focus on the Community**

This year, ACFN is partnering with organizations that work with populations at particular risk for obesity, especially in the Hispanic and African American communities. We are creating community-based programs to work with these at-risk populations to develop culturally-appropriate educational materials and programs to proactively address the obesity issue in their communities.

Additionally, ACFN promotes nutrition and fitness programs and policies that are being implemented to help combat obesity.

- **Healthy Horizons** is ACFN’s first “Honor Roll” recipient, a designation that recognizes local programs that encourage healthy lifestyles. Healthy Horizons is a community-based program in Owensboro, Ky., engaging all of its residents in its efforts to improve health and reduce obesity. The program’s mission focuses on educating the public about the need for community health improvement; exploring innovative health programs that work and increasing awareness of them; joining all the segments of the community together to work for common health goals; and, maintaining momentum for improving healthy community efforts. Residents have committed to doing their part to meet these goals by forming a youth obesity task force, improving personal nutrition and fitness habits, providing nutritious food choices at community events, and increasing access to fitness centers.
- **Kidnetic.com** is a communications and Web-based program designed to provide important nutrition and physical activity information for children and their families. Kidnetic.com, funded in large part by food and beverage companies, provides children, parents and teachers with creative resources to specifically address the challenges of childhood obesity. It is can and is used by community and school programs as part of their health and nutrition curriculum.
- **America On the Move™** (AOM) is a nationwide movement developed by the University of Colorado’s Center for Human Nutrition dedicated to helping communities across our nation make positive changes to improve the health and quality of life of all their citizens. AOM is designed to provide education, support and tools to Americans of all ages to encourage them to take just 2000 extra steps each day, and eat 100 calories less in order to create a balance between energy expenditure and consumption. The program promotes simple steps to be more physically active and to eat more healthfully, such as using a pedometer to keep track of your steps. For many people, by walking an extra 2,000 steps a day or cutting out 100 calories a day, a positive energy balance can be achieved. ACFN is supporting states and local communities – such as DC On the Move and Virginia On the Move – as they join this national movement, and helping them customize the program to meet the needs of their own communities.

### **Special Emphasis on Children Needed**

While it is clear that the problem of obesity is widespread, its impact on America’s youth deserves special attention. If we are to help future generations develop and maintain healthy lifestyles for the long-term, we must first give them the tools and resources necessary to do so. This requires a balanced approach that focuses on providing sound nutrition information to parents, students and teachers and encouraging and funding more physical education and recreational opportunities.

The Committee may be interested to know that the Society of Nutrition Educators recommends 50 hours of nutrition education annually, yet the national mean is only 13 hours per year. Teaching proper nutrition to America’s youth will give them the tools they need to adopt a

healthy lifestyle that meets their own needs and allows them to enjoy their favorite foods as part of a balanced diet.

We must also find ways to encourage children to increase their level of physical activity. Studies have shown that children who participate in physical education programs fare better physically and academically than those who are inactive. As the National Association for Sport and Physical Education reported, in addition to controlling weight, a quality physical education program helps children improve self-esteem and interpersonal skills, gain a sense of belonging through teamwork, handle adversity through winning and losing, learn discipline, improve problem solving skills and increase creativity.

However, an alarming number of children have little or no regular physical activity. According to a report issued by the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), about one in four children do not get any physical education in school. Physical education requirements in our public schools have been declining over the last twenty years and only about 50 percent of elementary schools have physical education teachers on staff. Outside of school, the statistics are equally concerning. Today, the average child spends 900 hours a year in school as compared to 1,023 hours watching TV.

And for those who are worried that PE crowds the schedules of schools under pressure to raise academic standards, consider that research from the California Department of Education found that regular physical activity can positively impact academic performance. I would also recommend the Committee look into the success the PE4Life program is experiencing in bringing a new kind of physical education program to schools focusing on skill building instead of competition. Experience to date shows that with a little determination even the most challenged school districts can work physical education into their school day with little or no additional expense.

The benefits of exercise for both children and adults are undeniable. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 10 percent to 15 percent of individuals who have a healthy BMI do not engage in physical activity on a regular basis. And regardless of weight, all Americans must become more active. It is not just about fitness, it is about wellness. The bulk of scientific evidence concludes that abandoning the sedentary lifestyle and following a moderate exercise routine will greatly reduce your risk of dying of all causes and enhance your chance of living a longer, more active life.

### **The Food and Beverage Industry's Role**

The food and beverage industry acknowledges the role it plays in providing consumers with the many foods and beverages they enjoy everyday, and is committed to doing its part to help consumers to better understand how they must balance what they eat with what they do. The industry's commitment includes investing in:

- Innovative research into nutritious products,
- Providing consumers with products to meet their health needs and goals,

- Assessing portion size and packaging,
- Responsible advertising and marketing practices,
- Supporting health and wellness programs for employees, and
- Sponsoring nutrition education and physical activity programs, with an emphasis on schools and local communities.

In recent months, the industry has made great strides in many of these areas. For example, companies such as Campbell Soup Company, The Coca-Cola Company, General Mills, Inc., H.J. Heinz, Kellogg Company, Kraft Foods, Inc., Mott's, PepsiCo and others have introduced products with an improved nutritional profiles. These include new milk-based drinks for students, reduced calorie juices, reduced or trans fat-free snacks and entrees, new choices for smaller product servings – to name just a few. Restaurants like Applebee's, McDonald's, the Olive Garden and Wendy's are also contributing to these efforts by launching partnerships with activity and weight control organizations as well as offering new menu options such as salads, fruit snacks, reduced-calorie meals and balanced lifestyle education.

Numerous other industry efforts are underway that you will never read about in the newspaper or even notice in the grocery store. They include reviewing and adjusting the nutritional profile of many categories of products to reduce calories, fats and sugars, to lower cholesterol, add vitamins and lower sodium – without changing the taste of consumers' favorite brands. These are the types of "small steps" that HHS Secretary Thompson is encouraging that we believe will result in a giant leap forward in the fight against obesity.

### **Recommendations**

We need to expand our scientific and medical knowledge to tighten the belt on the nation's expanding waistlines. For example, nutrition and physical activity behavioral scientists have documented that few interventions have proven to be effective in real-world settings. In fact, according to leading behavioral experts, theoretical models of human eating and physical activity behaviors can only account for about 30 percent of the behaviors. That means there is more that is unknown than known about changing behavior and giving consumers the skills and tools they need to succeed.

Clearly all sectors of society must work together to tackle obesity. ACFN believes the following specific actions, conducted in partnership between the public and private sectors, can help tackle obesity while at the same time definitive, science-based solutions are being identified. We must:

- **Expand knowledge:** by identifying and bridging gaps through scientific and behavioral research.
- **Transfer knowledge:** by helping to disseminate what works to the organizations and individuals working in community and national settings.
- **Provide innovative products, packages and services:** by outlining industry actions to address consumer needs and demand for products with an improved nutritional profile and sponsoring community-based programs to improve nutrition education and physical activity.

- **Provide product information:** by participating in public and private efforts to provide consumers with new and improved information and materials about products, ingredients, and health and wellness benefits of food and beverages.
- **Improve nutrition and physical activity education and behavior change:** by supporting efforts to improve curriculum content and secure adequate resources to make a lasting difference in consumer behaviors involving eating, physical activity and balancing energy requirements.
- **Engage in public/private partnerships:** by identifying and/or creating partnership models that work to promote fitness, nutrition and energy balance.
- **Advocate for constructive solutions:** by putting the voice of the industry behind principled and prudent solutions that will make a real difference in the fight against obesity.

Ultimately, individuals have to make a choice about the foods they eat and the level of physical activity they engage in. Government can and should provide information to help consumers make informed choices. And Congress must embrace proposals that are positive, comprehensive and address obesity as an issue rooted in improper energy balance. After all, this discussion is not simply about weight gain, its about the health of our nation.

Thank you.