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Task Force Report: Obesity in Oregon is a Public Health Crisis

The Task Force for a Comprehensive Obesity Prevention Initiative, created by the 2007 Legislature, released a report today showing that obesity among Oregon adults and children is increasing at alarming rates and calling for investments in science-based prevention programs.

“One in five Oregon children today is overweight or obese,” Bruce Goldberg, M.D., task force chairman and director of the Oregon Department of Human Services said. “This is a public health crisis, and there is no time to lose in taking action.”

In Oregon today, six of every 10 adults is overweight or obese – 1.7 million of Oregon’s total adult population of 2.9 million. These adults have a higher risk of cancer, diabetes, heart disease and stroke as well as high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Every year, another 43,500 Oregon adults become obese. The proportion of obese adults has more than doubled in the past 18 years and the proportion of obese children has tripled in the past 20. Treating diseases related to obesity costs Oregon \$781 million per year.

“The health care costs are staggering, but we cannot simply treat our way out of the problem,” Goldberg said. “What we need, and the work of the task force supports this, is a comprehensive focus on preventing obesity.”

“Obesity is not a problem of willpower or personal character. People are not all that different than they were 30 years ago. What has changed is how and where we live,” said Mary Lou Hennrich, MS, BSN, a member of the task force and executive director of Community Health Partnership: Oregon’s Public Health Institute. “It is

too easy to find high-calorie, low-nutrition food and way too easy to be sedentary at work and at home. We need to get to work and make healthy choices the easy choices.”

Changing the environments where Oregonians live, work, study and play is a high priority of the task force. The report states that for Oregon to even begin to stem the tide of obesity, we must invest in a comprehensive prevention and education program, bring physical activity and nutritious food back into our schools and our daily lives and make the healthy choices the easy choices.

The report also recommended policy changes in the areas of land use and transportation, and changes in school, worksite and health care settings: “Choices about how active we are and what we eat are embedded in our social, cultural and physical environments. Changes in these environments caused the obesity epidemic. Changes in these environments are critical to ending the obesity epidemic.”

The task force, formed by the 2007 Oregon Legislature, studied the epidemic and developed funding and policy recommendations. Among the recommendations:

- Invest an initial \$10 million per year in a statewide, science-based obesity prevention and education program
- Invest an initial \$3.5 million per biennium to support physical education in schools

Link to report on Web: www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/copi/