



**WRITTEN TESTIMONY
On**

Healthy Choices for Healthy Children Legislation

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The Ohio Association of Health Plans is the statewide trade association for health insurance companies that provide health insurance coverage to more than 7.5 million Ohioans. I am providing this written testimony in support of SB 210 and HB 373 - Healthy Choices for Healthy Children legislation and to ask for passage of this important legislation.

Three years ago, as part of our efforts to ensure Ohioans have access to affordable health care benefits, our member plans developed a set of priorities and suggestions to help achieve a sustainable health care system. Recognizing that working with people to keep them healthy is as important as making them well, we identified public policy suggestions that included, among other things, changes focused on childhood obesity. These recommendations still stand today:

- 1) address standards for nutrition and calorie levels of foods served to school aged children to reduce existence of obesity in children; and
- 2) provide for statewide minimum standards for physical education in primary and secondary schools.

We believe that through the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children legislation, we are accomplishing both of these objectives, while adding in a third, important component – nutrition education.

SB 210 and HB 373 provide a unique opportunity for Ohio to take a national leadership role in the fight against childhood obesity. From the Whitehouse to the playground – and from children’s hospitals to health insurers – it seems as though everyone, everywhere in the United States is talking about the childhood obesity epidemic and trying to determine how to combat it.

The Problem

The focus on childhood obesity is not unfounded. Consider that:

- More than one of every three children (ages 10 to 17) in Ohio is overweight or obese – and the problem is widespread, affecting children in every corner of our state.
- By 2018, obesity rates in Ohio will eclipse 50 percent – with health care costs surpassing \$16 billion for the entire state and \$1,800 per person, if current trends continue.
- Ohio spends between \$4 billion and \$6 billion annually on health care costs and lost productivity associated with obesity.

Current Initiatives

Health plans have already been creating programs and initiatives with the goal of addressing childhood obesity among their consumers. Some specific examples include:

- Grants and sponsorships of programs that help teach children how to make healthy meals, improve their diets and develop lifelong eating habits, such as United Healthcare’s sponsorship of the Junior League’s Kids in the Kitchen initiative.
- Developing and hosting training programs to help raise parental awareness of the health issues associated with childhood obesity, such as Anthem’s online BMI training course, which features a virtual BMI wheel and web-based interactive practice sessions.
- Grants for school nurses to implement innovative ideas for promoting heart healthy habits among school aged children.
- Creating public awareness campaigns, such as Molina’s public service announcements to improve health education among Spanish-speaking families and their children.

Next Steps

While the programs above and many more like them are helping to address a growing segment of health care costs – they alone will not solve the problem. It must be tackled from every angle and through every entity that touches children’s lives.

Part of the solution resides in work that can be accomplished during the day through our state education system. Teachers and other educational professionals touch the lives of children on a regular basis – and in fact, children spend the majority of their awake hours in the classroom. Improving nutrition, increasing physical activity and providing access to appropriate and healthy foods in a child’s daily routine can only further the goal for a healthier Ohio.

We are also supportive of the coalition being developed in the legislation. Because Ohio’s health plans have medical professionals who are focused on developing innovative programs in this area and have a unique understanding of both the health and economic implications of childhood obesity, we would like to kindly request that you consider including a health plan medical director on the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children council.

As both providers of health insurance coverage to 7.5 million Ohioans and as employers to 51,000 Ohioans, Ohio’s health plans are concerned that, if left unchecked, childhood obesity could devastate our health care system with preventable costs and also cripple the productivity of our future workforce. In fact, research has shown that obesity has a huge impact on employee productivity, disability and life expectancy. Tackling this problem early on can result in a more productive society and sustainable healthcare system.

Through the Healthy Choices for Health Children legislation, Ohio has an opportunity to take a critical first step in standing up for our most treasured asset – our children – and ensure that they have a bright, vibrant future ahead of them. By providing them with a framework for a healthy lifestyle now – we give them the chance to create a lifetime of healthy habits, which will pay dividends in the form of better health and decreased health care costs for them, and for all of Ohio, for many years to come.