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Executive Summary

# The Health and Economic Impacts of Obesity in Alameda County

Potential Policy Interventions

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **The damaging health effects of obesity are creating a diminished quality of life for too many Alameda County residents and costing the County billions of dollars every year.**

Obesity, and childhood obesity in particular, has reached crisis proportions throughout the United States. Although most Alameda County residents fare better than much of the nation, the rates of obesity and overweight are still alarmingly high. Rates are disproportionately high in low-resource communities, including East and West Oakland and parts of Hayward and Union City. Obesity puts people at risk for a host of chronic diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol, hypertension, and some cancers.

- In Alameda County, more than half (54.6 percent) of adults<sup>1</sup> and a third (34.7 percent) of school-aged children (in grades 5, 7, and 9)<sup>2</sup> are overweight or obese.
- Heart disease and diabetes—both of which are tied to obesity—were among the 10 leading causes of death in Alameda County in 2010.<sup>3</sup>
- Diabetes and metabolic/nutritional disorders were among the 10 most common reasons for hospitalization of children in Alameda County between 2007 and 2011.<sup>4</sup>

### **Obesity is Costing Alameda County**

**Obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases are extremely costly** with an estimated 20.6 percent of all healthcare dollars nationwide spent treating obesity.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, the combined costs of health care spending and lost productivity associated with overweight, obesity, and physical inactivity in Alameda County were estimated at \$2.17 billion, and were projected to rise by as much as 28 percent between 2007 and 2011.<sup>6</sup> Alameda County itself spends an astounding amount of money each year on obesity-related health care costs alone. In the 2013-14 fiscal year, the County allocated \$653.9 million to healthcare costs;<sup>7</sup> according to national estimates of spending on obesity-related disease, \$134.7 million of these allocated costs will be spent treating obesity-related diseases.

### **Sugary Drinks Contribute to Obesity and Dental Disease**

**Sugary drink consumption is a key contributor to high rates of overweight and obesity<sup>8,9</sup> and is also associated with increased risk of dental disease.<sup>10</sup>** Sugary drinks include any beverage with added caloric sweeteners, such as sodas, energy drinks, sweetened iced teas, sports drinks, flavored milk, flavored waters, and sweetened juice drinks that are not 100 percent fruit juice.

- Nearly a third (31.3 percent) of Alameda County children aged 2 to 11 and almost two-thirds (63.7 percent) of Alameda County adolescents aged 12 to 17 drink one or more sugary drinks per day.<sup>11</sup> As a result, they may be adding upwards of 1,000 calories per week to their diets from sugary drinks alone.
- Dental disease among children is rampant across Alameda County school districts: 69 percent of third graders have experienced some form of dental disease, including 31 percent with untreated dental caries.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Local Food Environment Discourages Healthy Eating**

**High rates of sugary drink consumption are fueled by a local food environment that offers easy access to retailers that sell unhealthy foods.** It is very difficult to make healthy choices in this environment that is inundated with unhealthy choices.

- In 2007, there were nearly five times as many fast food restaurants and convenience stores as supermarkets and produce vendors in Alameda County.<sup>13</sup>
- Residents in many parts of the County rely on convenience stores and other small food retailers with a limited selection of healthy foods.<sup>14</sup>

## Potential Policy Interventions

Unless the County takes bolder action to combat the obesity epidemic, it will fail to fulfill its responsibility to protect the health and welfare of county residents. Many social and environmental factors influence individual behaviors and contribute to high rates of obesity. Just as there is no single cause of obesity, there is no single solution. The good news is that local government can have a significant impact on the environmental factors that contribute to obesity by implementing strong policy interventions that promote health.

No one policy intervention will radically improve public health; rather, a collection of strategies will create environments that promote health. In this report, we identify a number of policy strategies that have the potential to advance the healthy eating landscape in Alameda County. These strategies fall into four broad categories and include:

- 1. Public Awareness:** Create new public awareness campaigns conducted by the Alameda County Department of Public Health to directly support policy strategies and interventions.
- 2. Healthy Eating on Government Property:** Update the Alameda County Nutrition and Physical Activity Policy and Guidelines by adopting stronger nutrition standards that apply to a broader range of County facilities and programs.
- 3. Healthy Eating in Schools:** Support and encourage school districts in Alameda County to adopt policies that go well beyond state and federal minimums in order to support healthy eating and active living by students.
- 4. Community-Wide Policies:** Adopt innovative community-wide policies aimed at improving the local food environment in Alameda County, potentially including:
  - › Impose an excise tax on sales of sugary drinks and earmark the proceeds for public health initiatives.
  - › Limit unhealthy food sales by mobile vendors, particularly near schools and parks.
  - › Establish certification programs to improve the nutritional quality of foods in stores and/or restaurants.
  - › Adopt a licensing ordinance requiring retailers to stock healthy foods and beverages.
  - › Use zoning or Conditional Use Permits (CUPs) to restrict sales of unhealthy foods, particularly near schools and parks.
  - › Establish nutrition standards for restaurant children's meals, or prevent sugary drinks from being included with a children's meal.

The Public Health Department, working closely with the community, county leaders, and other stakeholders, can decide which strategies most closely meet the needs of Alameda County residents, are the most feasible, and will best promote a healthy food environment. This report provides a brief description of each strategy listed above to help guide these decisions. There are, however, political, legal, administrative, and enforcement issues related to each policy that are beyond the scope of this report and must be developed further to create a sound policy that will succeed in Alameda County. It is important to note that across the United States, few policies have been implemented to specifically address the consumption of sugary drinks, and the policies and programs that are currently most widely utilized (educational campaigns, government procurement and vending, and sales in schools, Nos. 1-3 above) are also already employed in the County to some extent. Going beyond these foundational strategies will require bold action and a comprehensive vision for the County's built environment.

## Conclusion

Alameda County and its cities have a strong history of promoting community health by addressing the social and environmental factors that drive chronic disease rates. In order to succeed in the ongoing fight against the obesity epidemic, the County must leverage and strengthen its existing programmatic and policy efforts and adopt wide-reaching strategies to combat high rates of obesity and associated chronic diseases.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> California Health Interview Survey. *CHIS 2011-2012 Public Use Files*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. (Hereinafter, "CHIS 2011-2012.") Available at: <http://ask.chis.ucla.edu/>
- <sup>2</sup> Babey SH, Wolstein J, Diamant AL, et al. *A Patchwork of Progress: Changes in Overweight and Obesity among California 5th, 7th, and 9th graders, 2005-2010*. 2011. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, November 2011. (Hereinafter, "A Patchwork of Progress.") Available at: [www.publichealthadvocacy.org/research/patchworkdocs/OFTpercent20brief\\_final.pdf](http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/research/patchworkdocs/OFTpercent20brief_final.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Alameda County Public Health Department. Data from the Community Assessment, Planning, Education, and Evaluation (CAPE) Unit. June 2013. (Hereinafter, "CAPE Data, June 2013.")
- <sup>4</sup> Kidsdata.org. "Hospital Discharges, by Primary Diagnosis, Alameda County, 2008-2012." Last visited March 7, 2014. <http://kidsdata.org/topic/290/hospitaldischarges-diagnosis/table#fmt=237&loc=127&tf=16,37,46,64,67&ch=573,717,574,575,576,577,578,579,580,581,582>
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- <sup>7</sup> County of Alameda. *County of Alameda Final Budget 2013-2014*. Available at: [www.acgov.org/government/documents/budgets/2013-14FinalBudgetCitizensGuide.pdf](http://www.acgov.org/government/documents/budgets/2013-14FinalBudgetCitizensGuide.pdf).
- <sup>8</sup> Schneider JE, Decker CS, Weintraub JM, et al. *The Public Burden of Liquid Candy: The Costs of Sugared Beverages to San Francisco*. August 2009, p. 7. Available at: [www.sfphes.org/component/jdownloads/finish/5-food/4-the-public-burden-of-liquid-candy-the-costs-of-sugared-beverages-to-san-francisco/0?Itemid=62](http://www.sfphes.org/component/jdownloads/finish/5-food/4-the-public-burden-of-liquid-candy-the-costs-of-sugared-beverages-to-san-francisco/0?Itemid=62)
- <sup>9</sup> Harrington S. "The Role of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Consumption in Adolescent Obesity: a Review of the Literature." *The Journal of School Nursing* 24(1): 3-12, 2008. Available at: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18220450](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18220450)
- <sup>10</sup> Marshall TA, Eichenberger-Gilmore JM, Broffitt B, et al. "Dental Caries and Childhood Obesity: Roles of Diet and Socioeconomic Status." *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology* 35(6): 449-458, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> California Health Interview Survey. *CHIS 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, & 2011-12 Public Use Files*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. Available at: <http://ask.chis.ucla.edu> [Data analyzed by Alameda County Public Health Department, CAPE Unit]
- <sup>12</sup> Alameda County Department of Public Health, Office of Dental Health. *More Than a Toothache: Untreated Dental Disease in Our School Children*. 2006, p.6. Available at: [www.acphd.org/media/53546/toothache.pdf](http://www.acphd.org/media/53546/toothache.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> California Center for Health Advocacy. *Searching for Healthy Food: The Food Landscape in California Cities and Counties*. January 2007. (Hereinafter, "Searching for Healthy Food.") Available at [www.publichealthadvocacy.org/searchingforhealthyfood.html](http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/searchingforhealthyfood.html)
- <sup>14</sup> The Reinvestment Fund. *The Reinvestment Fund Policy Map*, 2010. Accessed January 24, 2014. [www.policymap.com](http://www.policymap.com)

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