INCREASE ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITIOUS FOODS

The Issue:
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), our nation spends 86% of our health care dollars on the treatment of chronic diseases, many of which are preventable through healthy lifestyles. The impact of obesity is significant and measurable in increasing health care costs, lost workplace productivity and years of life lost. Prevalent and costly health conditions such as cancer and heart disease are closely related to overweight and obesity. Quality of life declines with increasing weight which can trigger problems such as knee and joint pain, sleep apnea and decreased fertility. The CDC’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data show that in 2015, 34.5% of non-pregnant adult Iowans were overweight and 32.1% were obese, based on body mass index (BMI). Over 1.5 million adult Iowans are overweight or obese. In 2009, the cost of medical care related to obesity in the U.S. was estimated to be between $147 to $210 billion. Other estimates suggest that “Iowa could save $5.7 billion by 2030 if BMI were lowered by five percent.” Absenteeism and poor work performance cost employers an average of $506 for every obese employee. However, Iowa faces not just an obesity epidemic but rather the twin epidemics of physical inactivity and poor nutrition. Only 47% percent of Iowans reported participating in at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity weekly and even fewer, 17.9% added muscle strengthening to that regimen.

CDC has identified nutrition, physical activity, and obesity as Winnable Battles. Nationally and across Iowa, progress in these areas is achieved by developing policy, systems, and environmental initiatives that help make healthy choices available, affordable, and easy. CDC supports several approaches to improve nutrition and physical activity, including improving the food environments in childcare, schools, hospitals, and workplaces; reducing sodium levels in processed and restaurant foods; eliminating artificial trans-fat in the food supply; and increasing opportunities for safe physical activity.

Behavior change related to healthful decisions is more likely to occur when all the cues (individual, interpersonal, institutional, community and public policy) are pointing in the same direction.

Policy Solutions:
- Improve availability of affordable healthier food and beverage choices in public service venues by requiring government food procurement to conform to the most current U.S. Department of Agriculture and American Heart Association dietary guidelines.
- Ensure school districts are actively engaged in local school wellness policy implementation, assessment, and public updates.
- Require incorporation of pedestrian routes, bike routes, and safe routes to school as elements of the city comprehensive plans and implementation through zoning and subdivision regulations. (Note: This would require amending the state code).
- Urge federal, state and local entities making transportation decisions to adopt acceptable complete streets standards. This includes streets that are built for all users including pedestrians and cyclists and users of all ages and abilities.
- Support third party reimbursement for primary care treatment of overweight/obesity from a medical provider and registered dietitian.
- Offer incentives or tax credits for small businesses offering employee wellness programs that include assessment, education and evaluation components.