

## MAINE OBESITY ADVISORY COUNCIL



# Preventing and Reducing Obesity in Maine: A Call to Action

## *Executive Summary*

Obesity is a complex, chronic disease with multiple causes. Our understanding of its risk factors and effective prevention and intervention strategies is evolving. Other states have shown that through innovative policymaking and public-private partnerships, progress can be made to prevent and treat this costly chronic disease. This paper outlines known causes of obesity, identifies strategies used in Maine and in other states, and presents a potential path forward for reversing this epidemic.

## **Obesity is a growing concern in Maine**

Over the past two decades, the rates of obesity in Maine have increased for children and adults. Today, 31% of adults have obesity, a three-fold increase since 1992,<sup>1</sup> and 15% of teens in grades 9 through 12 have obesity, a 36% increase since 2001.<sup>2</sup> People at higher risk of obesity tend to be those with lower incomes and education levels, those living in rural communities, and people from traditionally marginalized communities, including racial and ethnic minority groups.

## **The causes of obesity are complex**

Behavioral, economic, environmental, and genetic factors all influence individuals' weight status. Higher rates of obesity for some subpopulations are exacerbated by underlying inequities, including adverse childhood events, poverty and low wages, lack of access to healthcare, chronic stress, inadequate housing, and unsafe neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> Each person is a product of their genes, family norms, and socio-economic conditions. People are surrounded by influences that either positively or negatively shape their health status and behaviors, including schools, neighborhoods, communities, workplaces, and media platforms. To change the trajectory of obesity, all levels and influences will need to shift.

## **The disease of obesity increases the risk of developing other serious illnesses**

Obesity puts an individual at greater risk for developing other chronic health conditions, such as hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, asthma, and stroke. It increases the risk of sleep apnea, breathing problems, 14 different cancers, pregnancy complications, and mental illness, such as depression and anxiety. Obesity also increases the risk of developing severe COVID-19 illness once infected. The increasing prevalence of this disease raises concerns that we can no longer ignore.

## **Many states are leading the way to prevent and reduce obesity**

Efforts to prevent and treat obesity look different in every state, but there are some commonalities across longer-standing initiatives. The most successful efforts have state funding and support, multi-stakeholder engagement, public-private partnerships, and comprehensive state and local programming. They have long-term plans and commitments and rely on evidence-based strategies. Many of these states reference [The Guide to Community Preventive Services](#), a collection of evidence-based findings from the [Community Preventive Services Task Force](#).

1 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020) Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. <https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/>

2 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Adolescent and School Health. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm>

3 Baciu A, Negussie Y, Geller A, et al. (Eds.). *Communities in action: Pathways to health equity*. (2017). National Academies Press. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>

## Maine's efforts to prevent obesity have been limited

Maine has made some investments in obesity prevention programming at the community and state levels over the last two decades, but most programs were funded with time-limited, competitive federal grants that were not renewed and not continually funded by the state legislature. Despite the growing health and economic impacts of obesity, resources for the state's obesity prevention efforts have waned dramatically over the last decade. Obesity prevention has simply not been a priority for Maine lawmakers while changes to federal funding for prevention programming have further diminished Maine's investment in preventing and reducing obesity. Currently the state's obesity program is managed by one half-time position, down from a staff of three several years ago.

## Maine has a clear roadmap for reducing obesity in every community

In 2017, the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) and Let's Go! convened a group of stakeholders to make recommendations and identify evidence-based strategies to address obesity in Maine. This collaborative effort, called the [Maine Obesity Advisory Council \(MOAC\)](#), developed a practical roadmap for obesity prevention programming and policies in six settings – early care and education, out-of-school programs, schools, healthcare, government, and community.

MOAC reviewed and assessed recommendations from national experts and researchers, studied previous efforts in Maine, and collected input from stakeholders. The result is a comprehensive set of evidence-based goals, strategies, standards, and resources for local and state level action, designed for collaborative efforts that can be tailored to Maine communities. Integrating equity and positive messaging to reduce obesity stigma and bias, MOAC developed [clear and tangible recommendations](#).

## Investment is needed to create a healthier future

Obesity rates have increased dramatically over three decades, and it is well understood that reversing the trend will take time as well as sustained investment and action at the federal, state, community, and clinical levels. There is a clear path for preventing and reducing obesity in Maine. Now is the time for action.

### THE PATH TO PREVENTING OBESITY IN MAINE



**Build Capacity.** Enhance Maine's statewide capacity to prevent and reduce obesity by increasing staff, enhancing data collection & analysis, and investing in evidence-based obesity prevention programming.

**ACTION:** The Maine CDC should actively pursue funding from the Maine Legislature and the federal government through grants and other opportunities.



**Support Communities.** Invest in best practice obesity prevention programming at the community level, including education, training, and support for local policy change.

**ACTION:** Governments, schools, employers, and service agencies should formally adopt, support, and equitably invest in the MOAC recommendations.



**Implement Strong Policies.** Disrupt the environment in which obesity thrives by advancing obesity prevention policies.

**ACTION:** Policymakers should strengthen federal and state food programs, improve infrastructure for physical activity, ensure comprehensive and affordable insurance coverage for obesity treatment, and invest in healthy children and families.



**Focus on Equity.** Build systems and infrastructure to address geographic and demographic disparities.

**ACTION:** The Maine CDC and community-based partners should engage experts and stakeholders in ongoing equity-centered planning and advisory functions.