



13 July 2010

The Honorable George Miller, Chairman  
Committee on Education and Labor  
2205 Rayburn House Office Building  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington DC, 20515

Dear Representative Miller,

As retired Generals, Admirals, and other senior leaders of the United States Armed Forces, we are deeply troubled by the difficulty that child obesity is placing on our nation's ability to sustain a high level of military readiness. **In this regard, we thank you for introducing H.R. 5504, the "Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act."** If enacted, this historic legislation will help improve the health of our nation's children and, ultimately, strengthen national security.

By now most of us have heard that child obesity rates have more than tripled in the last 30 years. New data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) paints an even starker portrait of the last decade. According to data from the CDC, in the years between 1998 and 2008 the number of states reporting that 40 percent or more young adults were overweight or obese rose from one state to 39.

Obesity is now the leading medical reason why young Americans today are unable to qualify for the armed forces. At least 9 million young adults, or 27 percent of all young Americans ages 17 to 24, are too overweight to enlist. Since 1995, the proportion of candidates who failed their physical exams due to weight problems increased by a staggering 70 percent. This all-too-common disqualifier is limiting the pool of available recruits and eroding our military readiness.

Beyond its harmful impact on the overall number of youth who are able to qualify for military service, obesity also imposes a great fiscal burden on our nation. Every year, the military discharges over 1,200 first-term enlistees before their contracts are up because of weight problems; the military must then recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$50,000 for each man or woman, thus spending more than \$60 million a year. Still, such costs pale in comparison to those associated with obesity-related heart disease, diabetes, cancer and other health problems. For example, projections by the American Public Health Association indicate that, "left unchecked, obesity will add nearly \$344 billion to the nation's annual health care costs by 2018 and account for more than 21 percent of health care spending."

Reversing the growing trend of child obesity is essential if we want to increase national security and improve overall American health and prosperity. Not surprisingly, turning the tide of obesity in this country will be a tremendously difficult task. There is no single action that we as a nation can take to remedy this problem. However, it is clear that one immediate step we must take is to improve the quality and nutritional value of the foods and beverages served in our schools.

1212 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20005

202.464.5224

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The school setting is critical for shaping the lifelong eating and exercise habits of our youth. Research published in *Health Affairs* shows that as much as 40 percent of a child's daily caloric intake occurs at school. What children eat in school can either be part of the problem, or part of the solution.

Fortunately, H.R. 5504 effectively addresses the issue of nutrition in schools. The legislation includes provisions that will raise the quality of all foods and beverages served on school grounds. Specifically, it will require the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a new set of nutrition standards for foods and beverages served through the school breakfast and school lunch programs that are consistent with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans (Sec. 201). An additional 6-cent per meal reimbursement will be provided, on a performance basis, to help schools purchase the fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats, whole-grains and low-fat dairy that they will need to meet increased nutrition standards (Sec. 201). Current nutrition standards for the school breakfast and school lunch programs have been in place since 1995. An update of these standards is long overdue. H.R. 5504 will also require the Secretary to establish similar science-based standards for all foods and beverages sold competitively (Sec. 204).

In addition to making improvements to nutrition standards and overall meal quality, H.R. 5504 also includes provisions to promote nutrition education. The bill will direct the Secretary to provide funds, equal to one half cent per reimbursable lunch served, to states for nutrition and wellness promotion (Sec. 207). It will also instruct the Secretary to award competitive grants for the purpose of supporting community partnerships that are designed to promote wellness (Sec. 247). Nutrition education is vital to maintaining a healthful environment for youth. In many cases, the habits that children form in their early years persist into adulthood. The journal *Health Affairs* reports that 80 percent of children who were overweight at ages 10-15 were obese at age 25. Properly managed, nutrition education programs can provide children and their families with the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to make lifelong healthful choices.

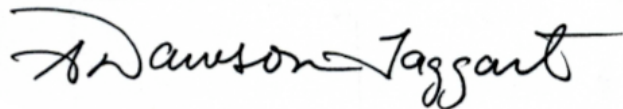
H.R. 5504 also includes proposals that will help simplify enrollment and increase access to child nutrition programs. Increasing access to nutritious food is equally important as improving the quality of school meals. While it may seem counterintuitive, it is well documented that hunger and food insecurity also contribute to obesity. H.R. 5504 includes provisions to improve the direct certification process. First, it will authorize the use of Medicaid data for direct certification (Sec. 103). It will also establish performance awards that will incentivize states to maximize the use of direct certification (Sec. 102). Funds will be awarded to states that demonstrate either outstanding performance or substantial improvement in directly certifying eligible children.

Many children who experience persistent hunger are also obese, because they more frequently have access to unhealthy foods or snacks instead of regular, nutritious meals. Recent research by Rachel Tolbert Kimbro of Rice University and Elizabeth Rigby of the University of Texas at Houston, published in *Health Affairs* has shown that subsidized meals can help low-income children maintain a healthy weight.

Increased access to school lunches and breakfasts can help remedy this problem by helping to ensure that children regularly get enough food to eat and the food they eat will be nutritious enough to help them develop healthy eating habits avoid obesity.

Military concerns about the fitness of our children are not new. In fact, the National School Lunch Act of 1946 was originally passed as a matter of national security. At that time, there were legitimate concerns that malnourishment would render American youth unfit to defend the nation. Today, it is obesity that threatens the overall health of America and the future strength of our military. It is imperative that we act now, as we did in 1946, to ensure that future generations of Americans will be fit to serve in a 21st century military.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Dawson Taggart". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A" and a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Amy Dawson Taggart  
*National Director*