



# OBESITY Is a Business Issue

By Jessie Azrilian

**M**ore than two-thirds of U.S. adults are obese or overweight, with 14 states reporting obesity rates above 30 percent. Now, consider how a population of unhealthy adults impacts businesses: increased health care premiums, decreased employee productivity, and increased absenteeism, to name a few consequences. If current trends continue, the obesity rate is predicted to rise above 50 percent in the next 15 years. A future workforce whose majority is overweight or obese is harmful to U.S. competitiveness and holds potentially debilitating long-term economic impacts.

Children often learn habits from their parents, and research indicates that unhealthy kids become unhealthy adults. Employer measures to promote a culture of health in the workplace and community through corporate wellness programs and childhood obesity prevention initiatives can help ensure both the current and future workforce is healthy and prepared to succeed in a competitive economy.

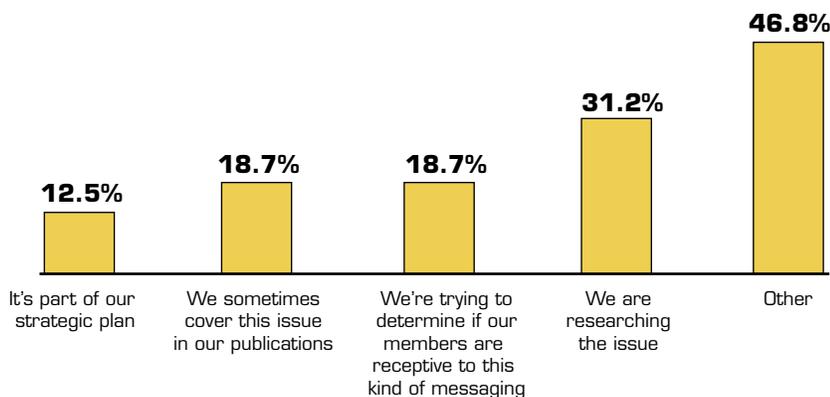
A new report by the American Heart Association indicates Americans overestimate their own health: while 74 percent of the 2,000 surveyed employees reported being in good or very good health, in reality 42 percent had been diagnosed with a chronic condition such as high blood pressure. While this is a troubling snapshot of employee health, the findings also reflect important opportunities for business leaders to improve health outcomes in the workplace. Notably, the study highlighted the influence senior leadership has in driving employees to engage in workplace health programs.

## Workplace and Community Wellness

A recent QuickPoll of ACCE's membership asked chamber leaders to describe community and member concerns about the impact of employee health and childhood obesity on both the current and future workforce. From the 90 chamber executives surveyed, 93 percent rated their members as being either very concerned or slightly concerned about the impact of employee health on their businesses; 85 percent of chambers said their communities are concerned about preventing childhood obesity.

Chambers of commerce support both workforce and community wellness in several capacities, including convening members and serving as a health and wellness resource for businesses, and developing community-wide initiatives. The ACCE QuickPoll revealed that 65 percent of surveyed chambers promote corporate wellness programs now or plan to do so in the future. Examples of how chambers engage include: hosting events such as roundtables and conferences to promote corporate

## Chamber Involvement in Supporting Childhood Wellness



wellness plans to members; joining or forming community-wide partnerships to address wellness issues; leading regional initiatives through chamber wellness committees, councils or sub-committees; and including corporate wellness in chambers' economic strategic plans.

### Taking Action

The Meadowlands (N.J.) Chamber of Commerce's Health & Wellness Committee focuses on activities that directly impact their members, such as producing an Annual Health & Wellness Guide with vital information to help members navigate health-care insurance, health programs, safety compliance and wellness.

The Charlotte (N.C.) Chamber of Commerce seeks to impact the broader community through its health initiatives. The Healthy Charlotte Council, which is comprised of chamber members, seeks to help Charlotte achieve a top 10 ranking in the American Fitness Index within the next five years. The Council has set specific goals for Charlotte, including identifying key indicators of the fitness index and tracking status, establishing connectivity with pertinent organizations to drive community collaboration, and increasing the national reputation of Charlotte as a healthcare hub.

### Childhood Health and Obesity Prevention

In addition to corporate wellness initiatives, 65 percent of surveyed chambers from ACCE's QuickPoll also currently promote childhood wellness programs or plan to do so in the future. Examples of specific activities chambers noted include supporting childhood obesity prevention in a chamber's legislative agenda; working with local governments to implement child care ordinances; and providing topical surveys, reports and communication briefs to members.

Through ACCE's Education Attainment Division, chambers of commerce can access tools to engage business in developing an effective College and Career Readiness agenda. The division was formed to help meet businesses' need for graduates with deeper learning skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, collaboration, and effective communication. For more information about the Education Attainment Division and to see a roster of your chamber peers engaged in education and workforce development, visit: [www.acce.org/divisions/ead](http://www.acce.org/divisions/ead).

### Focus on Health

The Traverse City (Mich.) Chamber of Commerce is connecting economic success to early childhood health and education through the Traverse Bay Great Start Collaborative. Great Start is Michigan's early childhood initiative and prioritizes "health" as one of its five main focus areas. The farm-to-preschool initiative encourages early healthy eating habits by connecting local farms to home-based and center-based child care facilities to incorporate locally-grown fruits and vegetables into preschool meals and create age- and culturally-appropriate curricula for students and parents to learn to both deliver fruits and vegetables as well as to teach children where their food comes from.

As the relationship between workforce health and business productivity becomes more distinct, employers recognize how obesity-related illnesses affect profitability. Chambers of commerce have an important opportunity as facilitators to mediate the interests of business, the community at large, and policy makers to foster a culture of health. ☑



Jessie Azrilian is director of ACCE's Education Attainment Division, contact her at 703-998-3571 or via email at [jazrilian@acce.org](mailto:jazrilian@acce.org).

### Interested in Learning More?

Visit the new Workforce Wellness webpage (<http://www.acce.org/divisions/acce-education-attainment-workforce-wellness/>) to learn how chambers help create healthier communities through initiatives to support childhood obesity prevention, corporate wellness, and access to healthcare.

Research supporting this story:

<http://healthyamericans.org/report/100/>

<http://blog.heart.org/ceo-roundtable-tackling-health-in-the-u-s-workplace/>