CSG summit focuses on innovative policies to combat obesity

by Tim Anderson

Just as the nation’s obesity problem didn’t arise overnight, a health care expert told state legislators last month, efforts to address it may not have an immediate impact on people’s waistlines or states’ bottom lines.

But Dr. James Marks urged policymakers to take steps now, saying inaction will lead to even higher costs and more adverse health effects in the future.

“This is a real epidemic,” Marks, senior vice president at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, told participants at the Council of State Governments’ Trends Summit on Obesity in Chicago.

“We haven’t seen anything quite like it. This is unprecedented in its speed and how sustained the growth rates have been.”

Over the last 25 to 30 years, for example, the rate of children (ages 6-11) considered overweight or obese has tripled to 16.5 percent. About 65 percent of U.S. adults are now overweight or obese.

In 2003, U.S. medical expenditures related to obesity — a chronic condition linked to diabetes, heart disease, stroke, some forms of cancer and depression — were estimated at nearly $75 billion.

With those sobering statistics in mind, state lawmakers took part in the summit to learn more about innovative and effective state policies and to develop new ideas as well. The summit was held as part of the ongoing Healthy States Initiative, a partnership between CSG and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Obesity is unlike other health epidemics, such as smallpox or polio, that have been controlled in this country with vaccines. No single medical solution or policy step is expected to reverse current obesity trends, Marks said, but ongoing research can and should be tapped by lawmakers.

“There has to be a science behind the approach used,” he added.

Some policy alternatives already have been well-supported by the science, while others show great promise. But Marks said lawmakers also must be willing to adapt state policies as new research findings come in on how to combat obesity.

Participants at the meeting learned more about some of the highly publicized state efforts to date.

• Republican Gov. Mike Huckabee discussed details of his state’s Healthy Arkansas Initiative. It includes a pilot diabetes-education program for Medicaid recipients, who take part in individual and group sessions on nutrition and self-management. In addition, the state has strengthened physical education and nutrition standards in schools. Legislators also passed a law in 2003 to provide parents with an annual body mass index (BMI) for their child. The BMI is accompanied by an explanation of what the index is and information on the effects of obesity.

• Texas’ new school nutrition policies — which prohibit or set limits on certain foods and beverages while encouraging the availability of healthy alternatives — were examined during the summit.

• Republican Rep. Jean Hurhoff of Yankton spoke about her state’s Healthy South Dakota initiative. Part of that plan includes a new wellness program for state employees. Enrollees are given financial incentives to attend a health screening, complete a health risk questionnaire, and set and reach wellness goals. Specially designed obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular management programs also are available through the initiative.

“Our state employees are buying into the program,” Hurhoff said, noting that the state did not raise employees’ health insurance premiums this year because of the initiative’s success.

Legislators also examined how an individual’s environment, from the design of communities to the accessibility of supermarkets, can impact physical activity or nutritional levels. Participants were then broken into five work groups. They discussed new ways to promote healthy behaviors in schoolchildren, encourage physical activity in communities, create wellness programs for public and private sector employees, and deliver locally produced fresh fruits and vegetables to consumers.

One of the many services provided by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments is its Information Help Line, a research service intended to help lawmakers, legislative staff and state officials from across the region. The CSG Midwest staff is always available to respond to members’ inquiries or research needs regarding various public policy issues. The Question of the Month section highlights an inquiry received by this office. To request assistance through CSG Midwest’s Information Help Line, call 630/810-0210 or use the online form available at www.csgmidwest.org.

QUESTION: What are Midwestern states doing to promote better nutrition and increase physical activity in local schools?

ANSWER: Recent legislative action has focused on ensuring that local school districts comply with congressional changes made in 2004 to the National School Lunch/School Breakfast Program. Under federal law, school districts participating in the program will be required by the 2006-07 school year to have a local wellness policy in place. The plan must set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, campus food provision and other school-based wellness activities.

The Illinois General Assembly passed a bill this year to create a School Wellness Policy Task Force. This group would help facilitate the implementation of wellness policies in each local school district and develop statewide school nutrition standards. The group also would evaluate the effectiveness of various wellness policies. As of early July, Gov. Rod Blagojevich had not yet signed the measure. His signature also was needed on another wellness-related bill. It would create a public recognition program for schools that encourage students to make healthy choices regarding food and physical activity. Those “best practices” would then be shared with other schools.

Kansans lawmakers passed a measure this year calling on the State Board of Education to set nutrition guidelines for all foods and beverages sold to Kansas public school students. Local school districts must then consider these guidelines when developing their wellness policies. Michigan is considering legislation that would restrict the amount of sugar and fat contained in school meals and vending-machine items. Like many other states in the country, North Dakota tried but failed to pass a law limiting the sale of certain beverages on school property. Legislative attempts also failed in Illinois to prohibit vending machines from dispensing soft drinks and candy. However, the state did pass a resolution urging “the State Board of Education, the soft drink industry and the Illinois Statewide School Management Alliance to eliminate soft-drink beverage sales and junk-food products from school settings.”

Recent state and federal actions reflect concerns about the nation’s obesity rate and related health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes. More information on policy options and wellness strategies is available at www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy and www.healthinschools.org/issue/2005/jun3.htm.