

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions in Philadelphia. According to the Department of Public Health, in 2010, 63% all Philadelphians and 40.7% of Philadelphia children were either overweight or obese. The problem is particularly epidemic among adolescents whom the rate of obesity increased 74% between 1999-2009. In fact, Philadelphia has the highest prevalence of obese adolescents and the second highest prevalence of overweight adolescents.

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that obesity is also prevalent among children served by DHS. In fact, as a result of the growing number of obesity cases, the Department's medical unit recently purchased two scales with a maximum weight of 400. Additionally, the Department's nurses are seeing an increase of obesity related health issues including Type 2 Diabetes, sleep apnea, hypertension and asthma.

In July, an opinion piece published in the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) recommended the use of foster care to address extreme obesity in children. It stated that state intervention is needed on behalf of severely obese children who suffer from Type 2 diabetes, liver problems and breathing issues.

The JAMA article raised concerns among community members who worried their overweight children might be put in placement. In response to these concerns, DHS sponsored a town hall meeting to provide parents with information and resources that will help them adopt healthier lifestyles for themselves and their children. The event featured a panel of experts including Dr. Cindy Christian, DHS Medical Director, Dr. Giridhar Mallya, Director of Policy & Planning, Philadelphia Public Health Department, Sue Slawson, Recreation Commissioner and Elizabeth Wallace, a nutritionist from CHOP. As Dr. Cindy Christian explained, in cases of morbid obesity, DHS would first work with the family to help them address the issue. "Placement would only occur when the obesity is so severe that it places the child at medical risk and the parents are not making an effort to help the child lose weight."

Commissioner Ambrose agreed explaining that DHS's medical unit is there to help educate and support families whose children suffer from obesity.

According to Dr. Mallya, obesity-related diseases are the second leading cause of death in Philadelphia, accounting for approximately 20,000 deaths in the last 10 years. Moreover, rates of obesity among children have doubled over the past 25 years because of increased consumption of unhealthy snacks and beverages and decreased physical activity. In an effort to address these issues, in March 2010, the Department of Public Health launched the *Get Healthy Philly* initiative. The program promotes healthy eating, active living, and smoke free lifestyles by making the healthy choice the easy choice for Philadelphians," says Mallya. "We are partnering with agencies inside and outside of government to increase the availability and affordability of healthy foods and enhance opportunities for physical activity in daily living."

As part of its efforts to encourage physical activity among children and youth, *Get Healthy Philly* is collaborating with the Department of Parks and Recreation. At the town hall, Activity Coordinator Staci Stills demonstrated fun, no-costs ways children can incorporate physical activity into their day and Recreation Commissioner, Susan Slawson noted that the city's recreation centers offer a host of free and low cost opportunities for children and adults to participate in a wide variety of physical activities. "Residents can search for recreation centers in their neighborhood as well as for specific activities on the Department's web site," she said.

Another panelist at the event, Elizabeth Wallace, a clinical dietitian at Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania, recommended two easy but important ways parents can help children achieve a healthy weight—portion control and eliminating sugary beverages. Dr. Christian concurred and encouraged the audience to "Eat Your Juice" (i.e. eat fruit instead of drinking sugary juices).

To inspire healthier eating, the event also featured a cooking demonstration by the Health Promotion Council, which included tips for preparing great tasting, nutritious food.