Local Foundation Tackles Obesity in Children

John Urban, president of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation (GRHF), announced today that its board of directors has approved a ten-year Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Childhood Overweight and Obesity. GRHF and its Task Force, spearheaded by Andrew Doniger, MD, MPH, Director of the Monroe County Department of Public Health, have identified a single goal: Reduce overweight and obesity, as measured by Body Mass Index (BMI), from 15% to 5% of Monroe County children ages 2-10 by 2017.

There are several reasons to be concerned about childhood overweight and obesity. Twenty-one percent of third grade school children in Upstate New York are obese compared to 16% nationally. If obesity trends do not change, for the first time in our history, children may have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Childhood overweight and obesity frequently leads to adult obesity and a host of medical problems including diabetes, heart disease, cancer, asthma, arthritis and the need for joint replacement.

GRHF hopes to serve as a catalyst for change in reversing the growing trend of overweight and obesity beginning with children ages 2-10. Over the next decade, the Foundation will expand its support to help the community tackle this phenomenon with adolescents and working adults in the nine county area surrounding Rochester.

There are differences in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children across racial/ethnic categories: Hispanics 29%; African Americans 23%; and Whites 19%. Therefore a major component of the plan is to reach high-risk children and families with messages and programs that are culturally appropriate.

This strategic plan has four major strategies:

- Increased physical activity
- Improved nutrition
- Education and action strategies targeted at the local, state and national levels
- Communications campaign that provides consistent, targeted messages to the community including high-risk populations
John Urban, president of GRHF states, "Information is everywhere about the long-term effects of overweight and obesity. Yet we are slow to accept that our personal lifestyle affects our health. Significant advances in medicine and pharmacology have created a false sense of security – that the poor health and lifestyle choices of today can be reversed by a procedure or pill tomorrow. Changing overweight and obesity trends require that we change our daily behavior, what we eat and our level of physical activity, for the rest of our lives. By starting with young children, we hope that our community can reverse this dangerous trend."

The Foundation's full report will be published later this summer. As a first step, Request for Proposals will be issued in the near future to assist early child care centers to improve the level of physical activity and appropriate nutrition.

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