



United Way  
of Western Connecticut

## **Carrying the Weight of the Future** **A community response to the childhood obesity epidemic**

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Recently I have heard people throughout our community talk about current day challenges like they are too big to solve. A pervasive mentality that the actions we take individually and locally cannot really impact the great challenges of our day. Frankly, it's nonsense.

The mindset that one cannot individually make a difference seems to paralyze us into doing nothing at all. Yet our country has a history of tackling daunting challenges and finding a way to solve them. In that light, I wonder if the issue of childhood obesity has now fallen into the dreaded "unsolvable" issues category.

The problem of raising a generation of kids who are faced with a multitude of health risk factors not seen by prior generations seems too big to tackle. Perhaps we blame it on the fast food industry or television or parenting skills. But whatever we view as the cause, does it really matter? It's too big for us to solve here in the greater Danbury and New Milford area.

And yet, we believe that the tools to fix the problem are at our finger tips, if we just recognize it. A wise source once wrote that:

*We cannot simply hope to end starvation, for we have already been given the resources with which to feed the entire world if we would only use them wisely;*

*We cannot simply hope to end despair, for we have already been given the power to clear slums and give hope if we would only use our power justly;*

*We cannot simply hope to end disease, for we have already been given great minds with which to search out cures and healing if we would only use them constructively.*

The capacity and ability exist within the scope of the human condition; our challenge is to recognize that ability and make a commitment to utilize it. That is nowhere more true than with the issues facing our communities today – including childhood obesity.

Recently, the United Way of Western Connecticut began a process of identifying what challenges in our community carried the most significant long term threat to our common good. We asked our community partners, volunteers, elected leaders, donors, and community leaders what issues they felt would pose the greatest challenge to our future. What they said was both expected and surprising.

First, it was obvious from our conversations that as a community we believe that the foundation of any successful community is education. In particular, early childhood education where so much can be done to set the tone for long term life success. After all, how can the next generation hope to soar without the tools they need to be successful? Second, there was consensus that the recent dramatic economic downturn exposed gaps in our ability to help people create financially sustainable lives. In particular, there was concern about a new category of people in need. Individuals that do not know how and where to ask for help. To make sure our community's social service safety net is not torn, we were told, we need to find a way to provide this group of individuals with the assistance they need.

Both of these areas of need are troubling, but not really surprising. However, the last area they identified- childhood obesity - came as a surprise.

There have been plenty of stories in the media about the growing concern in the medical community over the health of our children. Yet what we have learned now is that, left unaddressed, this problem creates a risk that for the first time a generation of children could be worse off than the generation before them. That's a rather startling statement, perhaps, but it is the truth we came to understand.

Tom Brokaw has written movingly of the "Greatest Generation." Perhaps their greatest attribute was an ability to accept that their actions were undertaken not for themselves but for others. They sacrificed (although they probably did not see it that way) to make the future a safer, better place. Can we embrace that same ethos as it relates to the health of future generations? Can we find a way to do what needs to be done to assure a better future for our next generation?

Let's be clear on what we are talking about – the statistics are rather alarming:

- Obesity has tripled in the past two decades
- According to the National Survey of Children's Health, approximately 27.3% of children ages 10 to 17 years in CT are considered overweight or obese.
- The statistics are even more alarming for our minority children; African-American children are almost two times more likely than white children to be overweight or obese (44.9% to 23.2%) and almost one in three (32.4%)

- Hispanic children are considered overweight or obese.
- In our own community, only 19% - 54% of the students in our public schools are passing the standardized state physical fitness test (with the number being as low as 10% in individual schools).

From a clinical perspective, the implications of obesity have been extensively reported (greater risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and even cancer). Yet this is more than just a health issue, it is an economic one as well. Today, the total cost of overweight and obese adults in our society is estimated at \$117 billion per year and that can only rise as this generation of children ages.

What's at stake here is the future of our kids and the strength of our economy. We can argue about the cause, but we cannot argue about the implication. If we do not address this issue in our own communities seriously, the next generation will live shorter, less healthy lives and our health care system will be overwhelmed by an avalanche of obesity related health care problems. It is time for us to take up this fight as a nation for the consequences of ignoring this crisis is just too great.

The good news is that there are people who recognize the risk and are at work on solutions. In Danbury the community has organized a far reaching collaboration of non-profits, the school system, our health care institutions, and other keenly interested community leaders. The group – the Coalition for Healthy Kids - is already working on a pilot program in the Danbury school system that will test some new ideas on how best to teach our kids about the need for healthy eating and daily physical activity. This group of community partners is raising awareness of the issue by delivering the preventative health message of 5-2-1-0 – for each day children should have 5 fruits and vegetables, 2 hours or less of screen time, 1 hour or more of physical activity and 0 to almost no sugar-sweetened beverages.

Individually we can only begin to make a difference in the health of our own children, but together we can assure that all children find their way to a longer and healthier life. It is more than just a nice-to-have; it is an epidemic and a matter of life and death.

If we allow a generation of kids to live their lives worse off than our own, we have failed them. Is that the legacy that we should choose for the generation that will lead this nation long after we are gone?

Several months back the United Way of Western Connecticut ran a campaign called 100 Days, 100 Ways we Live United. It wasn't a fundraising campaign, instead it was a campaign designed to understand the power of individual acts. We heard from people that helped a single mother develop a budget, drove an elderly person to a doctor's appointment, and served food to those who were hungry. Don't tell those people that these small acts didn't make a difference.

Their actions were profoundly influential and contributed brick-by-brick to the construction of the framework of a strong, caring community.

At the United Way we spend our days trying to harness the power of small acts to solve the most intractable problems of our community. In essence, we live the law of synergy – the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. We believe that problems can be solved, not just reduced. That may seem naive to some, but in this country when we commit ourselves fully to repairing our world - solving a problem or righting a wrong - challenges fall away under the onslaught of shared commitment.

There is no issue where this is truer than childhood obesity. Join the important work of the Coalition for Healthy Kids by finding a way to make a difference in extending the life of a child today. Donate to a cause that deals with the issue, advocate on behalf of our kids, or volunteer to help make the future of the next generation better. Together we cannot just slow the incidence of obesity among our kids, we can eliminate it.

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