



PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

IMPARTIAL RESEARCH. INFORMED DEBATE.

For more information:

Rob Henken
President, Public Policy Forum
414-276-8240 or 414-708-4392 (c)
rhenken@publicpolicyforum.org

For immediate release

July 15, 2016

Report urges enhanced public-private collaboration to address obesity in Milwaukee

A report released today by the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum finds that “obesity is a serious and substantive public health challenge in the City of Milwaukee,” and recommends a stepped-up and collaborative effort between the City’s Health Department, nonprofit organizations, and private philanthropy to address it.

“A variety of Milwaukee-based organizations already are addressing this issue by enhancing opportunities for physical activity and working to ensure that all Milwaukee residents have access to fresh fruits and vegetables,” said Chris Spahr, the Forum’s 2015-16 Norman N. Gill Fellow and the report’s lead author. “Yet, our review of other cities shows that what may be missing here is a strong convener that can coordinate these organizations and leaders around a comprehensive obesity prevention effort.”

The report begins with a scan of federal, state, and local public health data to assess the current burden of obesity in Milwaukee. The data show that in 2014, 37.2% of Milwaukee residents were considered obese, compared to 32.7% in Milwaukee County, 29.3% in Wisconsin, and 27.7% nationally. The data also indicate that the city’s obesity challenge is

worsening, as its percentage of obese residents has grown by eight percentage points from the 29.6% considered obese in 2011.

“We also find that areas of the city with a low socioeconomic status have the highest rates of obesity,” says Spahr. “Moreover, there is a racial disparity, with the latest data showing that 45.1% of African Americans in Milwaukee suffer from obesity, compared with 31.4% of white residents.”

The report notes that factors that may contribute to high rates of obesity in poorer neighborhoods include a greater number of fast food outlets, fewer supermarkets, and fewer opportunities for physical activity and recreation.

In exploring existing efforts in Milwaukee to address obesity, the report first looked to the Milwaukee Health Department (MHD), but found the department currently is focusing on other high-priority public health initiatives, including lead poisoning, violence, infant mortality, and immunizations. It also found that Health Department funding has remained about the same during the past five years, leaving little room for new initiatives.

“Given its wide range of public health demands and flat public revenue sources, MHD's ability to launch comprehensive obesity prevention strategies likely will be difficult to achieve barring an influx of outside, dedicated grant funding,” says Spahr. “For this reason, it will be important to look at the resources that exist in Milwaukee outside of MHD and the extent to which they might coalesce around a comprehensive strategy.”

Milwaukee does have several community-based obesity prevention initiatives underway, including the Milwaukee Childhood Obesity Prevention Project (MCOPP), a coalition led by the United Neighborhood Centers of Milwaukee to shape policy and programming aimed at healthy eating and physical activity; initiatives organized by the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center on the south side and the Walnut Way Conservation Corps on the north side; and other efforts revolving around farmers markets and physical fitness.

“When we examined what other cities were doing to combat obesity, we found that public sector health departments have collaborated with community-based initiatives like those already occurring in Milwaukee to weave disparate activities into a comprehensive obesity strategy, typically selecting one convening agency to lead the effort,” says Spahr. “Such an approach should be considered here, and should include mechanisms to ensure resource growth and sustainability, outcomes measurement, and advocacy to place obesity prevention on the front burner of citywide public health efforts.”

The report also suggests that given the Milwaukee Health Department’s competing priorities, MCOPP would be the logical entity to play the lead role as convener. It cites similar efforts around teen pregnancy and infant mortality as potential models.

The full report can be downloaded at the Forum’s web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org. The report was produced under the Forum’s Norman N. Gill Fellowship, an initiative funded by the family of Norman N. Gill, the organization’s director from 1945 to 1984. The Fellowship offers a Milwaukee-area graduate student the opportunity to conduct a policy research project under the tutelage of Forum staff while engaged in academic studies.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

####