

IN THE NEWS

# Business has role in ending obesity



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Massachusetts is a national leader in health care access and quality. But ours is also one of the most expensive health care systems. New payment reforms may bring efficiencies, but targeting obesity reduction and better fitness will ultimately bend the cost curve for consumers, businesses and government.

One in three kids and three in five adults are now overweight or obese in the commonwealth. Obesity is the single biggest cause of deteriorating health and the greatest cause of increasing health care costs. Simply put, this means ever higher health care costs and a less productive workforce. For years, health insurers have been forced to increase prices by 6 percent to 10 percent in response to more claims. Most businesses have responded by shifting costs to employees and trying to make employees better consumers through high deductibles. But that does not change the core problem of deteriorating health.

The reasons for higher obesity are multifaceted. They include more sedate lifestyles, more screen time, less physical activity at schools, federal tax breaks for sugar and corn sugar, food deserts, and policies that promote car usage over public transportation. Until now, a coordinated attack on the major causes of obesity has seemed beyond the reach of employers and government.

But recently, a broad coalition of businesses, health care providers, public health advocates, and political and civic leaders from across Massachusetts have joined to form the Healthy People/Healthy Economy Coalition to work with state officials to develop a broad set of policy initiatives, many of which

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are being debated now on Beacon Hill. These proposals range from ending the sales tax exemption on sugary drinks (we are one of only 17 states not to tax soda), to mandating physical activity in schools and promoting smart growth, local farming, healthier food access and wellness in the workplace.

Knee-jerk opponents of a soda tax and other positive steps to reduce obesity will cry “nanny state.” But much of the problem was caused, often inadvertently, by government interventions. Now is the time for employers of all sizes to join in obesity prevention.

Without coordinated actions, increasing obesity will bankrupt our personal, business and government finances and doom our children to lives less healthy and vigorous than those of prior generations. The business community has a huge role to play on this stage.



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