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- John Govea, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Americans have a hefty appetite. In fact, the United States has become synonymous with over-consumption, unhealthy eating habits and for many, an ever-expanding waistline. While the percentage of adults considered overweight and their incidents of obesity-related diseases continue to climb nationwide, it is the country's most innocent citizens who are vastly affected by this surging epidemic.

"Right now we run the risk of losing our children – that is the bottom line," says John Govea, senior program officer, childhood obesity, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and proud Mexican-American. "For Latino boys, who were born in the year 2000, almost half will be diagnosed with diabetes in their lifetime and it is even worse for Latinas at 52.5 percent."

A recent report conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and Trust for America's Health named "F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future 2010," examined trends in the growth of obesity within the United States. According to the study, some 10.4% of children aged 2-to-5 and nearly one in five of tweens and teens from 12-to-19 are overweight. Those figures have nearly tripled in the last 30 years. These alarming statistics are directly attributed to the high percentage of obese parents within the U.S.

Today, more than two-thirds of states have adult obesity rates above 25% and eight states (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee and West Virginia) have rates above 30%. In 1991, not one state posted obesity rates remotely close to the percentages of today. This past year alone, adult obesity rates rose in 28 states with 15 of those states showing significant increases, for the second consecutive year. Even more

frightening, the numbers for both adults and children multiply substantially within minority communities.

Black and Latino communities are disproportionately affected across the country. The percentages of obesity in minority communities are higher in at least 40 of the 50 states. Research conducted by The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that overall 44.1% of Blacks are overweight. The "F as in Fat" report also found that for Latinos, a total of 19 states have obesity rates over 30%.

Unfortunately, children in the Latino community are reeling from the affects of the current obesity epidemic. Not only are they at risk of losing a parent to the series of illnesses and ailments associated with obesity, but 38.2% of them between the ages of 2-to-19 are more likely to be overweight or obese thus making them more susceptible to developing asthma, type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. While all these conditions can be serious, it is diabetes that is the most dangerous and potentially life threatening. Sadly, Latino children are more likely to develop diabetes than any other group in their age range.

While the pounds continue to pile on, there are growing initiatives to counteract the epidemic. A recent poll conducted by the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and American Viewpoint (2010), shows that 80% of Americans recognize childhood obesity is a serious problem and 50% believe it is such an important issue that every effort must be made to combat it. Still, the current response from the government and concerted efforts from within the affected communities have been inadequate. Govea believes the limited response is partly due to the relatively new, yet extremely fast rise in obesity percentages and the existence and acceptance of a culture of over-consumption that enables it.

"It wasn't until the early '70s—that's when the rise really started to happen," Govea explains. "We have become a society that glorifies over-consumption. Because that is something that has been happening for decades, it is going to take some time to change. What has evolved are social norms."

A CDC study shows 90% of school age children are not getting the recommended daily allowance of fruits and vegetables, which further increases the likelihood of overweight children. Unfortunately, such healthy produce is often costly and can be difficult to find in low income neighborhoods. And compounding the problem, many schools districts offer unhealthy options in the lunchrooms, from sodas to pizza and French fries.

In the growing fight against all things fattening, several states have adopted new and innovative programs within their school systems that focus on healthier food and an increase in exercise. This past March, the Pepsi Refresh program (a competition that grants several lucky winners with the financial backing to fulfill their dream) recently awarded Rick Delashmit; GM of Belleville Farmer's Market, with $25,000 to expand his business and give the young people of Illinois an opportunity to make healthier food choices. The grocer created the "Taste Buds" program, which brings fruits, vegetables and fun into the classroom. Students are invited to play a game that involves nutritional trivia. In order to win they must all try at least three different fruits and two different vegetables. It is a clever approach to both educate and make children more comfortable eating healthy food. Delashmit's program directly targets children who are most vulnerable to the conditions that contribute to childhood obesity.

"In the fall, we hope to expand [Taste Buds] further and go countywide especially in low-income communities where access is often a problem," says Delashmit. "If I can get to those classrooms, we can show the kids that trying this stuff, isn't going to hurt them. And maybe some of those kids won't throw those carrots away."

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation is another organization whose primary goal is to put an end to childhood obesity. Founded by the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation and supported by the RWJF, the Alliance created the Healthy Schools Program in 2006, which provides free assistance to more than 9,000 schools nationwide to help them reverse the national epidemic. Schools are eligible for Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum National Recognition Awards as a result of implementing health-promoting programs. At this year's awards ceremony in New York City, former President Bill Clinton honored Memorial High School of West New York, NJ, which is over 95 percent Latino, as the first school ever to receive a Gold School recognition. But this recognition came after years of implementing change in the school's culture.

"If you come in one day and say everything is going to change, it's not going to work," said John Fraraccio, West New York District Supervisor of Health and Physical Education. "After four years of using the tools and resources provided by the Healthy Schools Program, wellness is now an integral part of not only Memorial [High Schools] culture, but the culture of the entire district."

"The main thing is to get together with students or with fellow parents to really push the schools to make those changes. The Healthy Schools Program is a really good example of trying to change the culture of schools," Govea adds. "They are in a tough place these days in terms of the resources available to them but we really have to add on additional requirements. Showing them how they will be able to make those changes at low or no costs, is the key."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is one of many organizations devoted to improving the health of all Americans. As such, the foundation works with several groups, like Trust for America's Health, in an effort to permanently alter the surging trend of obesity. Initiatives implemented by both unhealthy foods. However, reducing the number of obese children in minority communities will continue to be an uphill battle, as environmental conditions and limited community resources, pose further obstacles.

"Within the last few decades we have development communities which emphasize cars rather than walking because they have no sidewalks," Govea reveals. "They have wide streets, but no sidewalks to move around safely."

Whether its unhealthy eating habits, little to no physical activity, cultural nuances or a combination of these paired with the environment you live in, the bottom line is that if the United States does not address the obesity epidemic with urgency, it will result in a severe health crisis. One that will impair its' ability to compete internationally and leave its' communities burdened with burgeoning health care costs, and confirm our children's life expectancy rate to be lower than their parents – something never before seen in American history, according to the New England Journal of Medicine.

"Our parents came here because they wanted a better life for us," reflects Govea. "Unless we do something our children are going to have a worse life than ours. That is not the way we were raised--it is always supposed to be better for the next generation."

Editor’s Note: At press time, First Lady Michelle Obama championed the anti-obesity platform in her "Let's Move" campaign. In an address to the Congressional Black Caucus she urged legislators in D.C. to join the fight against this epidemic stating, that today’s children “might be the first generation in history on track to lead shorter lives than their parents.”

In addition, Mrs. Obama spoke to the National Restaurant Association and asked restaurateurs and executives to rethink the food they offer and reformulate their menus to help combat childhood obesity.