

Conference to prevent childhood obesity kicks off this week

22 January 2007

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BERKELEY – At a time of year when many New Year's resolutions to lose weight and eat healthier have started to falter, researchers, educators, public health professionals and others dedicated to solving the nation's obesity crisis are meeting in Anaheim for the 2007 California Childhood Obesity Conference.

The four-day conference, which begins Tuesday, Jan. 23 and runs through Friday, is considered the largest meeting on childhood obesity in the United States. More than 1,700 participants are expected to attend from a wide range of fields including education, public health, politics and business. It is being organized by the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley, the California Department of Health Services, the California Department of Education and the California Endowment.

This year's keynote speakers are Jeanette Betancourt, vice president of Content Design at Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organization behind Sesame Street; Craig Kielburger, founder of Free The Children, the world's largest network of children helping children through education; and Dr. Richard J. Jackson, a UC Berkeley adjunct professor of environmental health and of city and regional planning and a former state public health officer.

"This rise in obesity began about 30 years ago," said Pat Crawford, co-director of UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health, cooperative extension specialist and adjunct professor of nutrition at the campus's College of Natural Resources and School of Public Health. "Obesity is a chronic condition that is increasing at rates previously only seen with infectious diseases. Turning that around requires a comprehensive approach, which is what this conference is about."

Childhood obesity has attracted growing attention over the years as weight-related health problems, including Type 2 diabetes, increase among children and adolescents. According to figures from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 16 percent of children ages 6-19 are defined as overweight, or triple what the proportion was in 1980.

Crawford noted that the first California Childhood Obesity Conference, in 2001, primarily attracted nutritionists and health officials. The conference now attracts participants from educators to city planners to park and recreation officials.

She also pointed out that California has taken important steps in recent years in the effort to provide healthier environments for children. A number of state bills signed in 2005 ban the sale of soda and sweetened beverages in public schools and increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in school meals. Some of the bills already have gone into effect, while others will kick in this July.

Jack O'Connell, state superintendent of public instruction, also has sponsored legislation requiring the adoption of health education standards.

"We in California have become national leaders in embracing the adoption of local school wellness policies," said O'Connell, who will be at the conference to address the role that the state's schools are playing in the fight against obesity. "It is our responsibility to ensure that our school children consume fewer calories and fats and eat more of the foods that will give them a decided advantage in the classroom, in sports and in life."

A number of innovative programs in California also have been initiated by the private sector, including Healthy Eating Active Living, a five-year, \$18.5 million program developed by Kaiser Permanente that includes health care industry leadership, community investment, partnerships and public policy.

In addition, in 2005, The California Endowment launched Healthy Eating, Active Communities, a four-year, \$26 million program to improve the food and physical activity environments for school-age children in six low-income communities in the state.

"Obesity is a societal problem, and as parents, business, civic and political leaders we have an obligation to help change the often overlooked factors that contribute to it," said Dr. Robert K. Ross, president and CEO of The California Endowment. "These include the architects and planners who design our communities and transportation systems, our school cafeterias and vending machines, and food and beverage marketers who target our kids, among many others."

Conference organizers expect to build upon this momentum this week, addressing the particular challenges faced by low-income populations, many of whom live in neighborhoods where parents are afraid to let their children outside to play, and where it is often easier to buy candy at a liquor store than fresh fruit at a grocery store. Studies have shown that children from low-income families are at greatest risk for being overweight.

"Limited access to healthy foods and other environmental barriers make it difficult for Californians to eat healthy and be physically active," said Dr. Mark Horton, state public health officer. "California can lead the nation in tackling obesity with the same success demonstrated in the state's anti-tobacco campaign."

Support for the conference is being provided by a number of agencies and organizations, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kaiser Permanente and the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation.