



YMCA

We build strong kids,
strong families, strong communities.

Testimony of
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Good Morning Chairman Dodd, Ranking Member Alexander and members of the subcommittee. I'd like to express appreciation on behalf of the nation's 2,687 YMCAs for your work to ensure the health and security of the nation's children and families.

The YMCA is the nation's leading nonprofit committed to strengthening communities through youth development, healthy living and social responsibility. At the Y, strengthening community is our cause. About thirty-five million children in the United States live within THREE miles of a Y and every day, we work side-by-side with our neighbors in more than 10,000 communities to make sure that everyone, regardless of age, income or background, has the opportunity to learn, grow and thrive.

Last year, YMCAs across the United States had a direct impact on the lives of more than 20 million people of all ages and backgrounds; about nine million of those were children and youth under the age of 18. In New York City, we serve nearly 400,000, half of whom are youth and teens.

By design, YMCAs are as diverse as the communities we serve and we strive to meet the unique needs of our neighbors. But at the heart of almost every Y is a belief that all kids deserve the opportunity to discover who they are and what they can achieve. In each of the five boroughs of New York City and in every congressional district in this country, we have at least one if not many YMCAs where kids are getting more interested in learning, making smarter life choices and cultivating the values, skills and relationships that lead to positive behaviors, better health, and the pursuit of higher education and achievement of their goals.

Challenges Facing Children and Youth

With more than 35 years as a YMCA professional in cities from coast to coast, I can attest to the YMCA's transformative impact on the lives of individual children, adults and families, but also to the surrounding community as a whole.

However, today's children are facing challenges unimagined a generation or two ago. The culprits are not new, but they are disturbingly real:

- Unsafe streets or the perception of unsafe streets leads parents to keep their children indoors and plugged into video games and the internet
- Budget cuts and increased emphasis on standardized testing has led to the disappearance of physical education from the school day

- A lack of sidewalks in newer neighborhoods means fewer kids can walk or bike to school
- The lack of supermarkets and the relative high price of fresh fruits and vegetables has made junk food from the corner store and fast food outlets the only choice for low-income families living in so-called “food deserts.”

The results are read in the shocking statistics: one in three American children are overweight or obese; one in three Americans born in the year 2000 will develop type 2 diabetes some time in their lifetime – with black, Hispanic and Native American children facing the greatest risk; American kids’ “screen time” in from of the TV or computer exceeds the hours they are in school.

For many children, support systems have disappeared. In an era where the parents of 28 million school-age children work outside the home, only 8.4 million K-12 children — or 15 percent — participate in afterschool programs. As the Afterschool Alliance reported in a recent study, 18.5 million additional children would participate if a quality afterschool program were available in their community. Instead, so many of these children are left to fend for themselves alone at home and need to have access to an afterschool program that offers a safe, nurturing space for them to learn, grow and realize their potential.

In 2003, in response to LARGE AND GROWING numbers of American children and young people suffering from depression, anxiety, attention deficit and behavior disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental and behavioral problems, YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School, and the Institute of American Values conducted research entitled, *Hardwired to Connect, The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*. The research presented evidence that indicated children are naturally predisposed to connect with others outside their nuclear families, for moral meaning and for openness. Meeting this basic, universal need for interpersonal “connectedness” is essential to health and to flourishing as an individual. But surprisingly, our society has fallen short in meeting these essential needs for all children, and large and growing numbers of our children are failing to thrive, academically, socially, and emotionally.

The research concluded that such community-based organizations as the Y, along with other neighborhood and faith organizations, are key to creating the environments and providing the support to improve the lives of American children and adolescents. The report also had recommendations for what all levels of government, employers, philanthropists,

foundations, religious and civic organizations, scholars, families and individuals could do. A full copy of this report and a list of the recommendations is being included for the record.

At the Y, we offer a range of programs — or perhaps a better word would be experiences — that contribute to closing the gap identified in the *Hardwired to Connect* research and building the necessary tools to help youth and teens reach their potential and develop values and skills that they carry into adulthood. Core offerings include childcare; before and afterschool care; tutoring; summer camp; civic engagement and leadership development programs such as arts programs and Youth and Government; and youth sports and aquatics instruction.

But these Y experiences are really more than meet the eye. Consider:

- Child care and afterschool care provide safe, nurturing environments for children to learn, grow, develop social skills, and engage in physical activity in which they might not otherwise participate.
- Sports and structured play not only builds healthy bodies, but also builds social and leadership skills.
- Swim instruction reduces the risk of drowning — a leading cause of accidental death in children — and also instills confidence and a valuable skill that can never be taken away.
- Camps provide a safe, thriving community for young people to explore personal interests, build self-esteem, develop interpersonal skills, discover the creativity and health benefits of the outdoors, and develop independence away from their parents.
- Civic engagement leadership programs like Youth and Government and Teens Take the City, a model city program we began in New York five years ago, enhance knowledge, build character and give youth and teens the opportunity to discover that they can make a positive change in the world around them, and realize the individual talents and potential they possess.

We believe that all of these opportunities are not just nice things to have, but rather essential to the healthy development of all our communities' children, in spirit, mind and body. Access to this experience should be considered a universal American birthright.

Childcare and Afterschool

Two key areas where Ys lead the way in engaging children and youth are childcare and afterschool care. Chairman Dodd, I do not need to tell you that these programs are a

lifeline for single parents and working families, and provide children with a safe place to go after school. Your leadership over so many years has proven your great understanding and support of our nation's children and families. With TEN THOUSAND sites across the country, the YMCA is one of the nation's largest non-profit providers of childcare and afterschool programs. In New York City alone, we serve over 15,000 children in 140 sites during the critical 3:00-6:00 p.m. time period, not simply bridging the gap between school and home, but creating an enriching and supportive environment for kids to continue to grow in their academic abilities, social interaction and physical health and well-being. Our focus on each individual's unique assets and talents takes shape in elements that promote artistry, emotional development, nutrition and physical activity, character development, sports, service-learning, as well as critical literacy, math and hands-on science activities.

We see first-hand the difference an afterschool program makes in the life of a child, contributing to their healthy development, and we hear it from parents and teachers alike.

Many afterschool programs — at the Y and in other organizations — are made possible through the U.S Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers funding and we know that many more would participate if funding were available. Of the more than 1200 applicants in 2006 to the Department of Education, only 325 were able to be funded. And FY2010 funding will mostly go to support current grantees. Currently, 207 21st Century Community Learning Centers sites are in YMCAs.

At the New York City YMCA we have six 21st Century programs currently operating for a total of \$1,478,149. As you might imagine, these are not only a very important program to hundreds of kids, but they enable hundreds of their parents to continue to work, knowing that their child is well cared for.

We look forward to working with the committee to protect and greatly expand 21st Century Community Learning Centers now and in the future.

Early child care provides millions of young children with the early learning experiences they need to be successful with the early learning experiences they need to be successful in their later school years. Finding affordably and quality child care remains a daily struggle for working families across the country. Given the current state of the nation's economy, parents are losing their jobs, waiting lists for access into child care providers are increasing and child care providers' salaries are decreasing. Child care needs are growing and funds allocated to address those needs are insufficient. We encourage Congress to increase funding for Child Care Development Block Grants over the current \$2.1 billion.

Health Care Needs

In early child care sites and our afterschool sites, we witness daily that children have a broad range of health care needs. According to researchers at the Georgetown University Health Policy Institute and the Kaiser Family Foundation, children need regular preventive care, including dental, hearing, and vision care, for their healthy development.

Through the Children's Health Insurance Program or CHIP, Congress has made great progress toward increasing access to quality health care for children. Since it was first introduced in 1997, CHIP has served a vital role in providing our nation's children with a safety net of health coverage that has reduced the rate of uninsured children over time. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of uninsured children in this nation dropped to 7.3 million in 2008, less than 10 percent of our nation's children — the lowest rate in 20 years. YMCAs often work with the social service network in our communities to ensure families are on the register — but the system remains complicated for families.

Childhood Obesity

And we cannot talk about the state of the American child without talking about childhood obesity. Nearly one-third of our nation's children are overweight or obese, putting them at risk for a whole host of chronic conditions that they shouldn't have to worry about until adulthood — type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol to name a few. Along with access to affordable health care, it is likely the most pressing health issue facing our children today. So what can we do about it?

As I mentioned previously, the Y offers a range of experiences that help kids move more and educate them about making healthy choices. But we also believe that our responsibility to support individuals of all ages to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles reaches beyond our walls and our programs. It extends to the entire community. That's why we are also committed to working with community leaders to influence policy and systems changes to increase physical activity and improve access to healthy foods.

The YMCAs Healthier Communities Initiatives, supported by the CDC and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, focus on collaborative engagement with community leaders, how environments influence health and well-being, and the role public policy plays in sustaining change.

There are nearly 150 communities participating in these initiatives – as well as six statewide projects including Connecticut and Tennessee. These communities and states are finding that:

1. **Families need access to healthy and affordable foods — we encourage Congressional action that gives families access to high quality nutritious fruits and vegetables.** Several YMCAs have created virtual farmers markets that procure healthy foods directly from farmers and distribute it to low-income families at a vastly reduced cost. Allowing families to use food stamps for programs like these would make them significantly more appealing. Increasing the reimbursement rates and streamlining the administrative process for the USDA's Child and Adult Food Care Programs would encourage more nonprofits to take advantage of these great resources.
2. **Second, families need safe neighborhoods for their children to play outside and programs** that can help children explore nature in meaningful ways, both structured and unstructured. Research from the Children & Nature Network tells us that green space supports children's quality of life and improves their physical, mental and social health. Additionally research conducted by YMCA of the USA and funded by the National Park Service gives insights into the barriers confronting low-income minority children and youth to reaching the great outdoors. For some urban youth, nature is seen as somewhere 'other than here' and a place that is hard to get to, expensive, and not perceived as relevant. Fear, time and not knowing what to do also presented significant barriers.
3. **Third, families need to be able to walk their children to school safely** if the school is nearby — this means safe routes to schools in the broadest sense. Communities need to be better connected through trails and paths so parents can travel with their kids to various destinations (parks, restaurants, libraries, etc.) and get physical activity along the way.
4. **Fourth, families need to be connected to community-based organizations** — like the Y — that provide a safe, healthy and physically active environment.
5. **Fifth, families, especially working families, need schools and afterschool programs** to provide adequate physical activity and healthy foods.

Our Healthier Communities Initiatives have had success in improving community walkability and pedestrian safety by changing zoning laws that ensure the inclusion of sidewalks in new developments, increasing access points to fresh fruits and vegetables by bringing farmers markets to communities where healthy foods are not available, and influencing policy to re-institute physical education requirements in schools and afterschool programs. In New York City, our YMCA has been an active partner with Columbia University and neighborhood

residents in the East Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium, whose work has led to the opening of supermarkets in one of the country's most underserved neighborhoods.

Simply put, we need to make the healthy choice the easy choice by ensuring that our communities have adequate opportunities for children, families and adults to engage in healthy behaviors in all of the places where they live, work, learn and play.

Federal Solutions to Obesity

At the federal level, YMCA of the USA has supported a comprehensive childhood obesity bill introduced by Representatives Kind of Wisconsin and Bono Mack of California, the Healthy CHOICES Act, which includes the Play Every Day Act, an increase in funding authority for the Physical Education for Progress (PEP) program, the Moving Outdoors in Nature Act and new authority for virtual farmers markets, farmers markets and community gardens. We have also supported the Complete Streets Act and efforts through the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act to innovate afterschool environments to enhance healthy living opportunities.

Help for Families

We also helped advance, and were very pleased with the inclusion of the Community Transformation Grants in health care reform as they are modeled after our healthy communities work. In fact the prevention provisions in the bill will go a long way toward improving the health of children and families and it is essential that community-based organizations are engaged at all levels in the delivery of these programs.

We also know that healthy habits start at home. The YMCA's Healthy Family Home program sends healthy messages home and provides resources and tools for families to take simple steps toward a healthier lifestyle. Healthy Family Home focuses on three key areas — Play Every Day, Eat Healthy and Family Time. Many YMCAs are incorporating Healthy Family Home into their existing programming, but it is also available to everyone in every community through the Web at www.healthyfamilyhome.org. We launched a PSA campaign with these messages in the New York City market earlier this year, and First Lady Michelle Obama has even included the Healthy Family Home toolkit on her *Let's Move!* Web site as a resource for parents.

While American children are certainly facing challenges on the road to a healthy, active and productive adolescence and adulthood, organization like the Y are there to support and nurture them. But so much more can be done.

We would very much like to thank this sub-committee, along with Chairman Harkin and the entire Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee for the many opportunities you've given the YMCA to address these issues.

As you move forward in your efforts to improve the health of the nation's children, please know that in the Y, you have a partner with a nearly 160-year track record of building healthy spirit, mind and body, and an on-the-ground presence in 10,000 American communities to address these pressing social issues. Despite the challenges facing our nation's children and youth, we see bright spots every day at the Y, and we are proud of our long history in helping children — in fact individuals of all ages — learn, grow and thrive.

Thank you for your time.