

DATE: September 27, 2012

REPORT TITLE: **CREATING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR HEALTHY LIVING IN PEEL**

FROM: Janette Smith, Commissioner of Health Services
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RECOMMENDATION

That the Supportive Environments for Healthy Living Strategy as summarized in the report of the Commissioner of Health Services and the Medical Officer of Health dated September 27, 2012, titled "Creating Supportive Environments for Healthy Living in Peel", be endorsed;

And further, that the Region of Peel be committed to becoming a model employer for healthy living by considering design, facilities, and service improvements in Regional buildings to promote physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviour among its workforce;

And further, that the Region of Peel advocate for local, provincial and federal policy changes that create supportive environments for healthy living.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- Peel Public Health undertook a comprehensive review of the literature about obesity and its contributing factors, mainly unhealthy eating, physical inactivity and sedentary behaviours to support the implementation of the Term of Council Priority Supportive Environments for Healthy Weights.
- Increased rates of obesity have been decades in the making and will require a comprehensive approach to successfully address over the next generation.
- Most people are unsuccessful in the long term in their individual weight loss attempts due to the biological drives to acquire and preserve energy, and our current obesogenic environment.
- There are potential adverse impacts from overly focusing on an individual's weight as compared to their overall health.
- Independent of weight loss, people can reduce the risk of chronic disease by increasing physical activity, reducing sedentary behaviour and eating healthier.
- A fundamental shift in Peel Public Health's and the Region's approach from a focus on 'obesity and healthy weights' to a proactive approach on 'creating environments that support healthy living' is required.

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DISCUSSION

1. Background

The Region of Peel is committed to maintaining and improving the health of Peel's community, and has identified supportive environments for healthy weights as a Term of Council Priority. To gather evidence about effective strategies, Peel Public Health undertook a comprehensive review of the literature about obesity and its contributing factors, mainly: unhealthy eating, physical inactivity and sedentary behaviours.

Peel Public Health sought information from a variety of high quality sources, including published scientific literature and recommendations from strategy documents from local and international jurisdictions. An expert panel was convened involving university researchers from across Canada with expertise in obesity, physical activity and exercise physiology, nutrition and healthy eating, healthy built environment, and public health interventions and policy.

The literature review and the expert panel provided a more complete understanding of the causes of obesity and the prevention efforts needed to address the causes. The key findings include:

- A person's weight is determined by the food they eat and their level of activity. However, healthy eating and physical activity are complex and inter-connected behaviours influenced by a broad range of individual psychology and physiology causes and societal, cultural and economic factors.
- It will likely take a generation or more to successfully control and reverse high obesity rates. Changes in the social and physical environments over the past 20 to 30 years have created an obesogenic environment, whereby people tend to gain weight in part because external environmental factors (e.g. food served and sold in public buildings, urban sprawl) hinder healthy eating and physical activity behaviours.
- Overly focusing on individual's weight as compared to their overall health, risks blaming and stigmatization. Most people are unsuccessful in the long term in their individual weight loss attempts due in part to the biological drives to acquire and preserve energy, and the current obesogenic environment.
- Independent of weight loss, individuals can be healthier if they are active and have good physical fitness and eat healthier. Further, sedentary behaviour is not simply the extreme end of physical inactivity, but is being considered a health risk independent of overall level of physical activity.

From these important insights, Peel Public Health developed a report that identifies a set of major recommendations and a strategy. The expert panel and staff used a feasibility analysis to prioritize relevant action areas for Peel.

The full report, *Creating Supportive Environments for Healthy Living in Peel*, is available in Legislative Services and the executive summary is provided in Appendix I.

2. Shifting the Approach

Among health professionals and the public for the past decade, there has been a focus on obesity prevention and on encouraging individuals to make healthier choices. Strategies to change these behaviours, however, need to consider the complex influencing factors contributing to obesity. In doing this, the most promising strategy lies in the investment of

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policies and programs that create supportive environments for healthy eating and physical activity.

The most fundamental recommendation for Peel Public Health is to shift their overall focus on achieving healthy weights to a focus on addressing the underlying factors that contribute to overall health. The following provides specific recommendations in achieving this shift in approach:

- Shifting from a focus on obesity and weight to a focus on supportive environments for healthy living.
- Shifting from a focus on specific nutrients (vitamins, fibre, et cetera) to a focus on eating flavourful, healthy foods and meals for the intrinsic pleasure, and for social, mental and cultural well-being.
- Shifting from a focus on prescribing recreational activity to a focus on activity and movement throughout daily life.

a) Supportive Environments for Healthy Living

A reliance solely on educational approaches is neither supported by theory or experience. Environmental supports are necessary for people to adopt and maintain healthy behaviours on a daily basis and in a variety of settings. For example, an individual may have the best intentions to eat healthy and be active, yet their efforts can be undermined in an environment where healthy choices are not available or very difficult to make (e.g., too expensive), and/or unhealthy choices are the default, easy options. Unfortunately, both of these scenarios accurately describe the obesogenic environments, defined earlier in the report, in which Peel residents currently live, work and play.

b) Eating Flavourful, Healthy Foods

Despite increased efforts to educate the public about nutrition and healthy eating, eating behaviours have not improved. Nutritionism, which is a focus on the single elements of food, has led the public away from the basic principles of healthy eating. Eating well is intrinsically pleasurable, supports excellent health and is a highly social activity that contributes to well-being. Food preparation, cooking, eating and sharing is a core feature of cultural identity. The simple act of preparing and cooking flavourful, healthy foods and meals, and subsequently sharing it with family and friends can be both enjoyable and beneficial to health.

c) Active Movement Throughout Daily Life

In the field of physical activity there has been a focus in the past on structured, higher intensity activities with prescriptions for minimum activity levels. In time-pressured lives, it is highly challenging for many to find that extra 30 minutes per day to meet activity prescriptions. Less emphasis has been placed on the utilitarian activities of daily life (e.g., household chores, walking or cycling to school or work) that can be considered as contributing to optimal health. Furthermore, recent research indicates that periods of being sedentary have adverse health effects, even if an individual is active during other parts of their day.

3. Proposed Direction

With the expert panel, Peel Public Health has developed a strategy to create environments that are supportive of healthy living. This strategy includes principles for action, prioritized

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settings, and cross-cutting themes. The following describes each of these components, and Appendix I includes a diagram of the strategy.

a) Principles for Action

Based on an understanding of the underlying causes of eating and physical activity behaviours in populations, and the requirements for achieving and sustaining behaviour change within populations, the following principles have been identified to guide the development of action plans:

- Create environments that support and facilitate healthy choices.
- Support individuals to desire, seek and make different choices, recognizing that they make decisions as part of families, groups and communities.
- Make use of a range of policies and programs to comprehensively address the many underlying causes of unhealthy eating, physical inactivity and sedentary behaviours.
- Maximize the impact of individual interventions by coordinating a sustained multi-sectoral approach creating a significant overall impact.

b) Priority Settings

The following settings were identified as priority areas for Peel Public Health's initial focus:

- Preschools
- Schools
- Workplaces
- Built Environment

Peel Public Health will build on established partnerships to support this new direction. For example, schools will have the option of applying for funding and working with school health nurses to create more supportive environments.

The expert panel encourages Peel Public Health to focus on workplace interventions at the Region of Peel for several reasons. Firstly, new research on the health risks associated with sedentary behaviour, such as sitting for long periods of time, puts staff at risk for chronic diseases including obesity, diabetes and heart disease, which ultimately affects the workforce's ability to function. Secondly, as a significant employer within Peel, the Region has the opportunity to lead by example by establishing a workplace that reduces sedentariness, therefore maintaining a healthy and productive workforce for others to emulate.

c) Cross Cutting Themes

Several themes were identified to support the strategy overall, and will be implemented across each of the four priority settings. These themes include: achieving policy change at all levels of government; social marketing messages regarding the shift away from a focus on weight; as well as use of the best available evidence and evaluation. Furthermore, because of its size and higher than average risk, there will be a focus on diversity and inclusion, working closely with the Region's diverse populations, particularly the South Asian population, to reduce health disparities.

Next steps will be to engage relevant partners to develop multi-year action plans for each component of the strategy.

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FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The resources required to support the implementation of a strategy to create supportive environments for healthy living is included in Peel Public Health's approved operating budget for 2012, and will continue to be included as part of ongoing budget planning processes.

CONCLUSION

The most promising approach in controlling and preventing obesity is to invest in policies and programs that create supportive environments for healthy eating and active living. Until then, the current obesogenic environment will continue to undermine all other efforts.

To support the implementation of the Term of Council Priority Supportive Environments for Healthy Weights, Peel Public Health will shift their approach from obesity and weight to a focus on supportive environments for healthy living. In taking a responsible approach to maintaining a healthy workforce, Peel Public Health also recommends that the Region of Peel continue to make it possible for Peel staff to make healthy choices and reduce their risk of chronic diseases, thereby establishing the Region of Peel as a model for other workplaces and other levels of government.



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APPENDIX I

Executive Summary

In recent decades, the prevalence of childhood and adult obesity has been steadily increasing in Canada. The health concern is that obesity increases the risk of several diseases and conditions including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers. The prevalence of diabetes is already high in Peel Region and with current obesity trends, it is projected that one in six people in our region will be diagnosed with diabetes by 2025. With its mission to protect and promote the health of the public, prevent disease and reduce health disparities, Peel Public Health is compelled to act to address this threat to the health of current and future generations.

Despite decades of exposure to messaging exhorting physical activity, 85 per cent of Canadian adults and 93 per cent of Canadian children and youth do not achieve the minimum level of physical activity necessary to ensure long-term good health and well-being. The public is inundated with confusing and at times conflicting advice regarding the intake of individual nutrients while people continue to make less healthy food choices. We know that providing information is insufficient to achieve behaviour change on a wide scale basis. It is time for a change in approach.

Preventive efforts need to target the immediate and underlying causes of adverse health outcomes. At its most simplistic, a person's weight is determined by the food they eat and their level of activity. However, the circumstances in which people have been leading their lives over the past 20 to 30 years have changed considerably. Physical activity has been essentially engineered out of people's lives and has been coupled with abundant, cheap and convenient food that is energy-dense and low in nutrients. These changes to our physical and social environments have exerted powerful influences on people's overall caloric intake, on the composition of their diets, and on the frequency and intensity of physical activity at work or at school, at home and during leisure time. In striving for greater productivity and convenience, we have inadvertently created an 'obesogenic environment' in which our surroundings, opportunities and conditions of life are promoting obesity in our population.

The increasing rates of obesity are the result of a normal response by normal people to an abnormal environment. Realistically, public health's only hope for tackling the obesity epidemic is to invest in policies and programs that create supportive environments for healthy eating and active living. Until then, individuals' decisions will be undermined by an environment where healthy choices are unavailable or difficult to make. Peel Public Health will therefore shift its focus from obesity and healthy weights to creating environments that support healthy living, where the healthy choice is the easy default choice for both food and activity choices. While obesity and adverse health outcomes are the motivation for our work, the focus of our attention will be on addressing the upstream causes of unhealthy eating, physical inactivity and sedentary behaviours. Eating and movement are natural human activities, but they need to be re-normalized within our society.

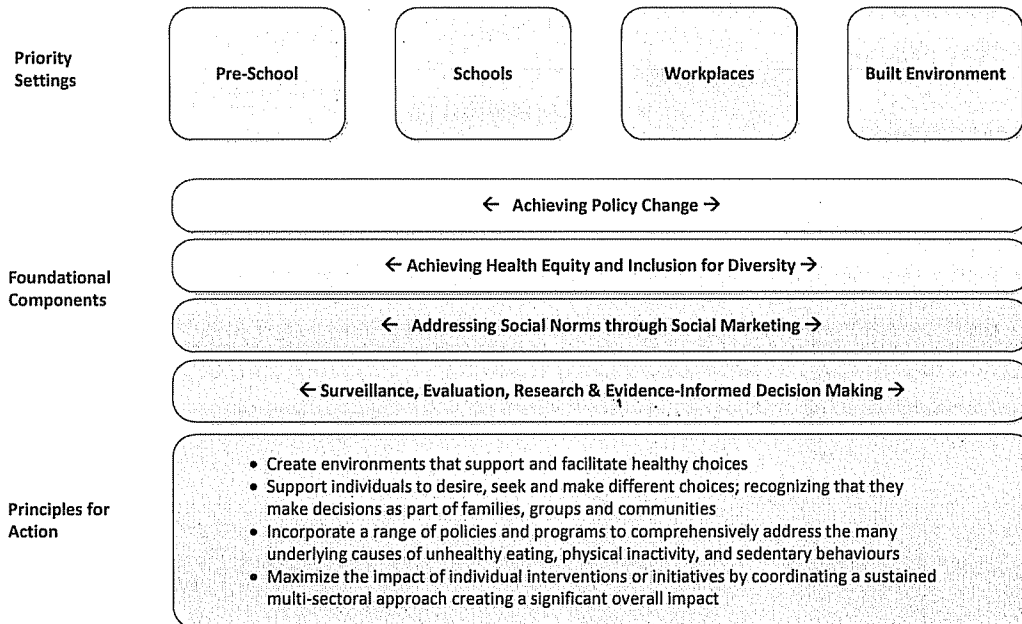
This problem has been building for decades. The challenge is large and the expected timelines long. Based on the best available evidence and expert advice, our starting point is a portfolio of comprehensive, mutually reinforcing components addressing a variety of settings: preschools, schools, workplaces and the built environment. For example, this includes working with child care facilities and schools to increase the availability of healthy food options and to increase physical activity throughout the day. It includes supporting active transportation initiatives to increase students' activity going to and from schools. It also includes healthy food standards for

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foods and beverages served in workplace buildings, starting with Regional buildings, as well as encouraging the design of buildings to encourage the use of stairs.

**Peel Public Health
Supportive Environments for
Healthy Living Strategy**

A Comprehensive Framework to Address Unhealthy Eating, Physical Inactivity and Sedentary Behaviours



As shown in the above diagram, these types of programs will be supported by cross-cutting initiatives including: achieving policy change at all levels of government, such as policies for food nutrition labelling, advertising to children, transportation standards; a social marketing campaign; and ongoing surveillance, evaluation, research and use of the best available evidence. Furthermore, we intend to focus on healthy equity, diversity and inclusion by working closely with the region’s diverse populations, particularly the South Asian population, due to its relative size and higher than average health risk. Our next steps will be to engage relevant partners to develop multi-year action plans for each of the portfolio components. Now is the time for action and we look forward to learning as we move forward, working with our many partners, to create more supportive environments for health for the people of Peel.