

ISSUE: **WHITE HOUSE ACTION ON YOUTH AND THE OUTDOORS**

BACKGROUND:

Obesity rates continue to rise, visibly depicting lifestyles with diminishing levels of physical activity. Studies show America's youth are spending more and more time indoors and watching screens – TV and computer, now totaling some 6.5 hours daily. Nearly 20,000 youth will be diagnosed with diabetes this year – a dramatic increase over a generation ago and putting these youth on a lifetime course of monitoring and medication. Attention Deficit Disorder prevalence is up markedly – as is the percentage of our youth now taking prescriptions for this problem and stress. Collectively, these and other consequences of lowered physical activity threaten our health delivery system – both by sheer demand and by the costs of providing healthcare to those who could easily prevent illnesses with 30 minutes daily of moderate activity. Data presented at the 10th International Conference on Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders strongly suggest that mid-life physical activity and diet influence intellectual performance as well as risk of developing cognitive impairments and Alzheimer's later in life. One study discovered links between brain function and cardiovascular risk factors even in young to middle aged adults.

Especially ironic is that America is so well equipped to provide safe, attractive outdoor fun with an astonishing array of recreation choices on public lands and waters covering one-third of the nation's surface. And while not distributed evenly, virtually no American community is opportunity-poor. An executive order – 13266 – directs federal land agencies to help create more physically active lifestyles. Yet visits to national parks, Wilderness areas and other key federally-managed Great Outdoors places are declining in the face of population growth.

Among the options which have been discussed for additional Administration actions are: 1) a Presidential commission; 2) a Presidential or multi-departmental advisory council (modeled after the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports and the Sportfishing and Boating Partnership Council); 3) modification of an existing commission or council; 4) creation of a new office and responsible official (modeled after the Surgeon General); 5) a new Congressionally-chartered corporation that would function to boost recreation in a way similar to that of the U.S. Olympic Committee relative to competitive sports; and 6) a White House conference or summit.

Although each of the options offers advantages, key considerations are: 1) action needs to be swift, and appointments and advisory committee requirements under FACA are substantial concerns;

2) action needs to assist in unification and consensus-building rather than be exclusionary, and the selection of a limited number of individuals to any body can create controversy and unwanted perceptions;

3) any commission or council creates substantial on-going costs and will be almost immediately faced with questions of sustainability under a new Administration starting in 2009; and

4) to be effective, the effort must draw together support from multiple federal departments and unify this with support from state leadership and the private sector.

Based upon these realities, the Administration is urged to initiate plans for a White House Conference, Summit or Roundtable on Children, Health and the Outdoors and a corollary Outdoors Opportunity Expo to showcase exemplary, public/private partnership efforts already underway and the unique opportunity to capitalize on the Great Outdoors to make Americans healthier, happier and more aware of environmental issues.

ACTION NEEDED:

We ask for your support of a White House Summit on Children, Health and the Outdoors for 2008.

MORE INFORMATION:

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