**Obesity within the United States: Introduction By Richard Dirksen**

Over the last decade, the nation has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people labeled as obese within the United States. Defined as weighing roughly 30 or more pounds over a healthy weight, the obesity epidemic has been described as the fastest-­‐growing public health challenge the nation has ever faced. Over the past 30 years the obesity rates within the United States have tripled. Statistics show that nearly 1 in 3 children in America are overweight or obese, and the numbers are even higher among African American and Hispanic communities, where nearly 40% of the children are overweight or obese. The Center for Disease Control has released statistics showing that *at least* 20% of the adult population of *every* state within the nation is currently obese, with 12 of those states having an obese population greater than 30%. A report from the United Health Foundation estimates that if the nation’s percentage of obese persons continues to climb at the same rate, that 43 percent of our country’s adult population will be classified as obese by the year 2018.

# The Dangers

Obese people are more likely to suffer from diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, sleep apnea (sleeping problems), and arthritis. Because of this, an obese person is also more likely die younger than a non-­‐ obese person. Obesity also takes a toll on the financial health of a family. For example, a family with an obese child or parent on average spends 30% more in health costs and 77% more in medication costs than a family without an obese parent or child. Statistics also show that lower income and minority families experience obesity at a higher rate than financially well-­‐off families. Therefore, these same families are more likely to suffer from the physical and financial consequences obesity.

# Food Deserts

A Food Desert is defined as an area where at least 33% of the population lives *more* than a mile from grocery stores or supermarkets that offer fresh fruits and vegetables. Many families living within a designated Food Desert must travel several miles to shop at stores providing a selection of healthy foods. Because many people who live in poor neighborhoods have little time, money, or the ability to travel to those grocery stores and supermarkets, this lack of access forces people to shop at the local, smaller bodegas and corner stores which frequently either do not have, or have a very limited selection of healthy food options.

On Wednesday July 20th, 2011, first-­‐lady Michelle Obama joined with some of the nation’s largest supermarket operators to announce a nationwide plan to remedy the nation’s “food deserts” as part of her plan to combat childhood obesity within the country. Over 650 Food Deserts have been located within the United States in both urban and rural areas. Recognizing that access to healthy and affordable food is an important role in curbing the obesity epidemic, several of the nation’s largest food retailers have joined with Obama and committed to opening grocery stores and supermarkets within Food Deserts. The hope is that this will give people in impoverished areas better access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and, thus, the chance to make healthier choices about what to eat.

But despite all that we now know about obesity, the causes -­‐ and solutions -­‐ for the epidemic remain hotly debated. Some questions to consider:

* Is obesity a direct result of poverty?
* Is the fast-­‐food industry with all its marketing of unhealthy foods to children and adults to blame?
* Are parents and the individuals themselves to blame for the choices they make about what they eat?
* Will the addition of supermarkets and elimination of food deserts be enough to combat childhood obesity?
* Would education about healthy eating make a difference?

Among adults and children alike, the numbers reflect that more and more people are becoming obese – and this increase affects everyone. But all too frequently the voice of those most directly affected by this issue is neither heard nor listened to – you. This task provides an opportunity for young people to voice their opinions about how best to combat the rise of obesity. **In your opinion, what should our country do to best fight the rise of obesity among our citizens?**