Obesity as a Public Policy Issue

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Public Policy

... An agreed-upon course of action, guiding principle, or procedure considered to be expedient, prudent or advantageous – a settled course of action adopted and followed by the public.

House & Young, 1988
Role of Public in Policy

... The people must be actively involved in making public judgments. ... To preserve American democracy, there is something for everyone to do – average citizens, institutions, people in positions of leadership, experts, government officials, the media – all of us.

Yankelovich, 1991
Is Obesity a Public Policy Issue?
Characteristics of a Public Policy Issue

An issue of broad concern:
- Extensive media coverage.
- Reported research.
- Professional association focus.
Characteristics of a Public Policy Issue

An issue on which choices must be made but there are no clear or right answers:
- 65% of U.S. adults are either overweight or obese.
- 15% of children are overweight.
- Startling increase in past 20 years.
- 3000+ deaths every four days due to obesity.
- Problem continues to grow.
Characteristics of a Public Policy Issue

An issue on which a range of people and groups must act:
- Ecological Model.
- Multiple disciplines.
- Need for partners.
Characteristics of a Public Policy Issue

An issue on which new approaches are needed:
- Society has not applied knowledge.
- Expert-driven models are not effective.
- Individual choice-making is not working.
- Inter-disciplinary and experiential knowledge needed.
Characteristics of a Public Policy Issue

Citizens have not weighed courses of action and long-term consequences:
- Single discipline approaches.
- Fragmented interventions.
- Tensions exist between individual and societal solutions.
Characteristics of a Public Policy Issue

An issue on which public decision makers need to be informed by public judgment:

- Current national policy is “one size fits all.”
- Impetus to deliberate exists.
- Model needed to assist obtaining “public voice.”
As a Democracy, how do we engage “the public” in making policy about the issue of obesity?
Public Deliberation

- A structured dialogue framed using 3-4 policy approaches.
- A means to make tough choices about policy directions.
- A way of reasoning and talking together.
  - Weighs the views of others.
  - Considers consequences and trade-offs.
  - Respects the perspectives and values of others.
- A means to find common ground for action.
Framing an Issue for Public Deliberation

- 3-4 policy approaches.
- Non-biased.
- Non-partisan.
- Stimulates thoughtful discussion.
- Engages people in “choicework.”
- Seeks common ground.
- Is not “the answer.”
Framing the Issue of Obesity
Work of the American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences

- Conduct web based survey.
- Draft framework.
- Collect additional input.
  - AAFCS National Meeting.
  - Summit on Obesity.
- Revise framework.
- Prepare moderators and recorders.
- Assess AAFCS members’ readiness to engage in public policy work.
- Conduct public deliberative forums.
- Prepare and distribute reports.
- Affect public action—Local—State—National

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Work of the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Public Issues Education Focus Team

- Identified obesity as an issue for Maryland—Spring, 2005
- Introduced the issue with an exhibit and conducted a survey at the MCE Annual Conference—April, 2005
- Team leader chaired AAFCS Public Policy Committee responsible for crafting the public issues education materials—Sizing Up America
- Conducted an 8 hour in-service for FCS & 4-H faculty introducing the materials—December, 2005
- Sizing Up America materials customized for Maryland and posted on Web—February, 2006
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