

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 13, 2011

Chairman Jon Leibowitz
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20580

Secretary Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Director Thomas Frieden
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333

Commissioner Margaret Hamburg
Food and Drug Administration
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Chairman Leibowitz, Director Frieden, and Commissioner Hamburg:

We are writing regarding the Preliminary Proposed Nutrition Principles developed by the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (IWG). We strongly support these voluntary principles, and the efforts of all four agencies to prevent childhood obesity.

Estimates indicate that obesity cost our country nearly \$150 billion in 2008, and that costs continue to rise as the prevalence of obesity increases across the country. The American Public Health Association has estimated that these costs will reach more than 20% of health care spending by 2018, if the obesity epidemic is not stemmed.

CDC data show that the prevalence of obesity has nearly tripled since 1980. Furthermore, the prevalence of obesity in children has increased more quickly than adult obesity and nearly one-third of our children are now either overweight or obese. The leading medical reason for military applicants being unqualified for service is obesity and overweight. Mission Readiness noted in their 2009 report that 27% of young adults in the United States are too overweight to serve in the military and thus “threaten...the future strength of our military.” It is alarming, but true, that children today are likely to be the first generation to have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

We are moving in the wrong direction when it comes to the health of our children and we must focus on public health efforts to prevent childhood obesity. In December 2005, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published a study on food marketing to children and childhood obesity. It noted that there is “strong evidence that television advertising influences the food and beverage purchase requests of children.” The IOM panel of experts also concluded that “food and beverage marketing influences the diets and health prospects of children and youth” and that “food and beverage marketing practices geared to children and youth are out of balance with healthful diets and contribute to an environment that puts their health at risk.”

Among the IOM recommendations was one that encouraged the establishment of marketing guidelines. The 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act directed the IWG to “conduct a study and develop recommendations for standards for the marketing of food” to children. Congress further instructed the IWG to consider positive and negative contributions of nutrients and to “determine the scope of the media to which standards should apply.” In response to this clear Congressional intent, the IWG has produced voluntary standards that are scientifically sound and support existing nutrition guidelines.

That IOM panel mentioned earlier and numerous other public health experts have noted that in order to prevent childhood obesity and encourage healthy dietary habits of children, we need an integrated, multi-faceted approach involving both the public and private sectors. To this end, voluntary marketing guidelines must be a part of our nation’s approach to combating childhood obesity.

We commend your collective work on these Preliminary Proposed Nutrition Principles and urge you to issue final voluntary guidelines that uphold the strong nutrition principles outlined in the preliminary guidelines and the application of these nutrition principles to the full range of marketing activities. Such principles will help ensure that our children are not destined to an unhealthier and shorter life than their parents.

Thank you for your consideration. For purposes of the administrative record, please submit a copy of this letter to FTC Project No. P094513.

Sincerely,

Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Rosa L. DeLauro
Member of Congress