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Group Says Employers Can Help Curb Obesity Epidemic

By Christine Grimaldi, CQ Staff

Innovative approaches from employers can help reduce obesity, experts said at a meeting about the epidemic's impact on business and labor.

The meeting centered on four main policy recommendations of the Strategies to Overcome and Prevent Obesity Alliance. The recommendations include a redefinition of weight loss success, eliminating the stigma of obesity and a push for more research to determine its causes.

Some employers offer programs such as Weight Watchers at work, but many problems exist between the high and low ends of the support spectrum, said LuAnn Heinen of the National Business Group on Health.

"There's a gap between that and you're eligible for surgery," she said in an interview.

She advised that research should determine additional measures that should be included in employee benefits packages. For instance, she said that medically supervised weight loss programs and pharmaceuticals may help but are not covered in most benefits packages.

Many employer members of Heinen's group are often satisfied if their employees maintain a stable weight annually, instead of gaining the one to three pounds typical per year.

Defining a five to 10 percent weight loss as a successful goal is the most important recommendation of all, and one that emphasizes health over cosmetic reasons to lose weight, said Christine Ferguson, the alliance's chair.

"I see a much greater willingness to talk about these issues than there have been in the past," Ferguson said in an interview.

Dennis Rivera, chairman of SEIU Healthcare, noted at the meeting that poorer Americans are disproportionately obese. There are 47 million Americans with no health insurance and 100 million who are under insured, he said.

"We continue to focus on treating obesity only after it occurs — rather than on preventive care," he said in a statement. "But you won't get preventive care without seeing a physician, and you won't see that physician if you don't have insurance or can't afford it. Obesity is another life threatening disease that illustrates how dire the need is for real and comprehensive national healthcare reform."

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