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Epidemic of Obesity among Latino Youth

By TEXAS STATE SENATOR LETICIA VAN DE PUTTE, R. Ph.

An estimated 39 million Hispanics currently reside in the United States, making us America's largest and fastest growing minority group. We are growing in more ways than one, however, as a rising epidemic of obesity threatens the health and welfare of our children.

According to recent studies, Hispanic children are nearly twice as likely to be overweight than non-Hispanic children. The reasons for this are complex, with cultural factors playing a strong role. For example, within the Latino culture, having a "heavier frame" is more acceptable socially than among other cultures. Also, education can contribute to families who may be less informed about matters of health and nutrition. As our immigrant population grows, we also see many bilingual children new to the United States rejecting lower calorie healthy foods in favor of higher calorie foods promoted in America's fast food culture.

Poor nutrition and lack of exercise can lead to much more than obesity. Diseases such as diabetes and hypertension can often occur as a result of obesity. We have already seen the incidence of these diseases increase among Latino populations, contributing even further to the health disparities that Latinos face. In fact according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDS), Hispanic/Latino Americans are 1.7 times more likely to have diabetes as non-Hispanic whites.

We know from experience and research that targeting parents is one of the most effective ways to address the problem of childhood obesity. Studies have noted that a family-centered program is critical to helping children make good dietary and exercise choices.

As both a Pharmacist and a Legislator, I have worked to address this issue in my home state of Texas. I proposed legislation that would allow school districts to send parents a health report card for each child which would include a measurement of their child's Body Mass Index (BMI), so parents would have information regarding their children's health status. BMI, which is the measurement of body fat based on height and weight, can be very useful in assessing the overall health of a student, thus protecting against life-threatening illnesses such as diabetes, sleep apnea, gallbladder disease, hypertension, joint problems, anorexia and bulimia.

On the federal level, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a program in partnership with the Hispanic Communications Network to provide national nutrition

information based on the USDA's *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and MyPyramid food guidance system.

Language barriers often prevent Latino families from having access to vital health information. The campaign's goal is to educate the Hispanic community about MyPyramid, which provides basic nutrition and dietary guidelines and will encourage individuals to make better food choices and improve their physical activity behaviors.

The program offers simple, attainable steps that any family can take to change their children's lifestyle and lower the risk of overweight and obesity. These include:

1. Increase fruit and vegetable consumption.
2. Decrease consumption of soft drinks and other sweetened beverages.
3. Decrease consumption of high-fat foods.
4. Offer appropriate serving sizes (i.e. Don't supersize!)
5. Decrease television viewing time.
6. Encourage active play.
7. Increase participation in family mealtimes.

For more information on making healthy food choices, go to www.mypyramid.com and click on the En Español button or call the toll-free hotline at 1-888-7PYRAMID.

By taking these simple steps today to improve the health, nutrition and activity rate of our children, we can start them on a lifetime of good choices that will help them live longer, healthier and happier lives. We simply cannot afford to raise a generation of children shackled by obesity – their lives and our future depend on it.

Senator Leticia Van de Putte, a pharmacist for more than 26 years, is now serving her third term as a Texas State Senator for District 26. Nationally, Senator Van de Putte is a member and former President of the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators and most recently, was elected as the first Latina President-elect of the National Conference of State Legislatures. She recently addressed the Latino Leaders Luncheon Series™ hosted by Mickey Ibarra & Associates which featured a panel discussion about obesity and other health issues faced by Hispanic youth.