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May 11, 2009

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NEW PROGRAM TARGETS OBESITY

(RICHMOND, Va.)—A new plan by the Virginia Department of Health seeks to reverse a 67 percent increase in the state’s adult obesity rate, a decade-long trend that has resulted in most adults in Virginia now being classified as either obese or overweight according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Separately, a new study by the National Center on Education Statistics found that 20 percent of all four-year-old children in the country are obese.

The VDH plan, the Commonwealth’s Healthy Approach and Mobilization Plan for Inactivity, Obesity and Nutrition, or CHAMPION, follows a series of regional meetings that included some 900 medical and health professionals, community groups, educators and local residents. The meetings examined specific programs and activities at the local level that led to healthier weight control practices.

The health department is releasing the CHAMPION Obesity Prevention Plan as part of a multiyear effort to develop a statewide approach to reducing obesity and overweight conditions among children and adults.

“Similar to our strategy to reduce infant mortality rates, our focus through CHAMPION is on community-based strategies,” said State Health Commissioner Karen Remley, M.D., MBA. “By bringing together diverse groups around a serious public health issue, we can identify solutions that already are working to reduce obesity and replicate these practices in other communities.”

According to the most recent figures from the CDC, 62 percent of adults in Virginia today are either obese or overweight. The CHAMPION program was developed by VDH’s Division of WIC and Community Nutrition Services to focus on individual and community empowerment.

CHAMPION offers program ideas in four areas:

- nutrition education and physical activity
- community involvement (promote best practices, increase public awareness)
- organizational policies (identify funding, creating healthy environments)
- media outreach (public education initiatives)

The Virginia Department of Health is inaugurating a series of community briefings across the state to present the findings of its regional meetings and the CHAMPION plan. The first briefing was held May 6 in Southwest Virginia in the town of Marion and a briefing will be held May 13 in Norfolk. These discussions will include information on research, guidelines, program ideas and resources that community groups can use in their local areas to improve the health of children and adults who are obese or overweight.

Community groups statewide will be encouraged to implement programs based upon CHAMPION recommendations and compete for grants from the health department to fund their programs. As many as 15 grants, for up to \$10,000 apiece, will be awarded by late summer.

“It’s our hope that community groups will work with government agencies, employers, schools, civic and faith-based organizations, health care providers and local residents to implement those components of the CHAMPION plan that best fit their specific needs,” Dr. Remley said.

Obesity and being overweight is determined by body mass index, or BMI, defined as weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters. For adults, a BMI ranging from 25 to 29.9 indicates someone who is overweight and a BMI that exceeds 29.9 is an indication of obesity. Among children and adolescents, being obese or overweight is defined by using sex-specific BMI measures for age growth charts.

Each CHAMPION program includes information on program design, target age group, implementation procedures and evaluation measures. The plan can be accessed at www.vahealth.org/WIC/Champion/index.htm. This site also includes BMI charts and links to a number of other obesity prevention initiatives in Virginia including Healthy Virginians and the Governor’s Nutrition and Physical Activity Scorecard.

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