Childhood Obesity in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

ISSUE: Childhood obesity is at epidemic proportions in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, and is the primary driver of type II diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.

Background: Obesity, first and foremost, is a preventable disease. Within Indian Country, it is a relatively new phenomenon. Within the past several decades obesity rates in Tribal communities have skyrocketed as a result of a few key conditions—lack of critical public health infrastructure, a high prevalence of food deserts, and high rates of poverty. In 2013, the Office of Minority Health (OMH) reported that American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) are 60% more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic Whites while also reporting that, overall, obesity and overweight rates for AI/AN adults are near a staggering 80% of the population. In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Health Interview Survey presented an age-adjusted obesity percentage for persons above the age of 18 to be 42.3% in AI/AN communities versus 27.4% in non-Hispanic Whites. Specific to youth, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in 2014 that AI/AN youth had the highest weight in proportion to their height (15.6%) while the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 2007 reported to Congress that since 1990, obesity rates have doubled for 12-19 year old AI/AN youth and tripled for 6-11 year olds.

Policy Recommendations:

- Establish Tribally-specific funding streams to address chronic disease among AI/AN youth.
  - As the primary factor in developing type II diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, curbing obesity in Native youth is a top priority. There are also tremendous financial incentives in obesity prevention, as a 2012 study showcased that treatment costs from the Indian Health Service for the 10.9% of AI/AN diagnosed with diabetes accounts for 32.2% of all treatment costs.

- Bring Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs under the purview of the Indian Self Determination and Education Act P.L. 93-638
  - Loss of traditionally significant foods and lifestyles and subsequent reliance on commoditized food programs have been linked to the rise of obesity in AI/AN communities. The spiritual and cultural significance of food for Tribal communities cannot be overstated, and its essential connection to Tribal sovereignty necessitates that its coordination and administration fall under the authority of Tribes.