Recommendations on Reversing Obesity Trends with Health Reform

As Congress enters the final stage of the national health reform debate, the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease (PFCD) believes that a top priority must be addressing the obesity epidemic through meaningful, evidence-based approaches. If nothing is done to tackle this crisis, 43 percent of U.S. adults will be obese by 2018, costing the nation an estimated $344 billion in medical-related expenses, according to a new report based on research by PFCD Executive Director, Ken Thorpe, Ph.D.

We have a great opportunity to reverse this trend and save nearly $200 billion in health care costs by enacting common-sense reforms designed to hold obesity at current levels. The PFCD proposes the following five recommendations, with examples of potential policy solutions, to address the obesity challenge:

1. **Remove barriers and empower Americans to take control of their health.**
   
   **Policy solutions include:**
   - Offer evidence-based care coordination and wellness programs to help overweight Medicare beneficiaries shed pounds
   - Include obesity counseling as a preventative service with no or low cost-sharing
   - In public schools, reinstate physical education and require school lunches to meet nutritional standards
   - Ensure that all Americans have access to a place where they can be physically active and purchase healthy foods by supporting tax, grant and subsidy programs that achieve these goals

2. **Educate Americans to see being obese as a serious medical condition that significantly heightens their risk for other health problems.**
   
   **Policy solutions include:**
   - Use public awareness campaigns and other communications tools to empower health care providers – with a focus on primary care physicians – to treat obesity like a medical condition
   - Develop recommendations for approaching the subject of overweight/obesity in a clinical setting
   - Support training at all levels of the health care workforce that emphasizes reducing obesity as a way to prevent and manage chronic diseases

3. **Ensure that fear about the stigma of obesity does not eclipse the need to combat it.**
   
   **Policy solutions include:**
   - Increase funding for research on obesity prevention and control
   - Support educational workshops that give all Americans guidance in preventing and treating obesity
   - Provide support systems for patients and family members to adhere to treatments for obesity

4. **Redesign our health care system to treat obesity like a preventable medical condition.**
   
   **Policy solutions include:**
   - Pay for “extra” care like weight loss counseling
   - Reimburse for nutritionists and other specialists
   - Increase coverage of comprehensive primary care, which should, in theory, include better obesity monitoring and prevention

5. **Engage employers and communities to get them invested in promoting wellness.**
   
   **Policy solutions include:**
   - Offer tax credits to employers that offer wellness benefits and encourage health
   - Ensure that programs are voluntary, easy to access and have a well-designed and well-communicated structure and series of benefits
   - Provide incentives and funding through community health centers (including school-based centers)