

# Healthy Communities Are Good Business and Good Public Policy



By James J. Florio  
& David L. Knowlton



The theme of the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease is: "Let's Change the National Focus from "Sick Care" to "Health Care."

**W**hat could New Jersey's municipalities do with \$31 billion in additional revenue over the next 15 years?

Thousands of additional green acres could be set aside and scores of new urban playgrounds could be built.

Hundreds of new law enforcement officers could be hired making all New Jersey communities safe and secure.

And, of course, property tax rates could be slashed dramatically.

In these tough budgetary times, locally, on the state level and nationally, it seems almost unfair to suggest that billions in real savings could be achieved if our state and local leaders took some simple steps. But those savings, indeed, are there.

A recent study, published last fall by the renowned Milken Institute showed us the incredible savings which could be realized by our state if we made a concerted and renewed effort to fight chronic diseases. The savings nationally are staggering: some \$1 trillion in avoided costs. Here in our own state of New Jersey, we can expect to see \$31 billion in savings by helping our citizens lead more active lifestyles and eat healthier.

It is because of this promise that we both have agreed to co-chair a new effort in our state: The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease NJ. We are pleased to see that the New Jersey State League of Municipalities was one of our earliest partners and is playing such a crucial role in helping the Partnership meet its goals.

The fact is that 75 percent of healthcare spending, more than \$1.5 trillion, is currently spent on the treatment of chronic diseases: diseases that can be prevented, or managed more effectively.

Many mayors in New Jersey are already taking the lead on this important issue through the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute-New Jersey State League of Municipalities Mayors Wellness Campaign. More than 230 mayors from Hackettstown to Wildwood Crest have pledged their support to promote active living and healthier lifestyles in their communities.

The New Jersey State League of Municipalities is to be congratulated on its efforts to create better communities through education, advocacy and collaboration. For almost a century, the League has served local officials throughout the Garden State and in turn provided our citizens with a better quality of life.

Let's look at the facts: Americans are spending billions each year on obesity-related illnesses and 57 percent of New Jersey residents are obese or overweight. In 2001 alone, the medical expenses for treating these problems in our state

totaled \$2.3 billion. In addition to obesity, chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, stroke, mental disorders and pulmonary conditions are shortening the lives and reducing the quality of life of more than 4 million citizens of New Jersey. Approximately a third of all New Jerseyans suffer from heart-related diseases, including obesity, hypertension and high cholesterol. The emotional toll of these diseases on the caregivers and families is enormous and so is the economic cost. In 2003, these costs totaled \$7.5 billion.

The theme of the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease, which is a national program ([www.fightchronicdisease.org](http://www.fightchronicdisease.org)) is: "Let's Change the National Focus from "Sick Care" to "Health Care."

Chronic diseases are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States, killing 1.7 million Americans each year. The good news is that chronic diseases are often preventable and frequently manageable through early detection, improved diet and treatments. Municipalities can be a part of the solution by joining with The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease and changing the national focus from "Sick Care" to "Health Care". According to Ken Thorpe, Chair of Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health and a former White House health policy advisor, "Any serious proposal to reform our health care system must address preventable chronic disease."

Many Americans believe that the number one issue in the nation is the economy, with health care a close second. The fact is that 75 percent of healthcare spending, more than \$1.5 trillion, is currently spent on the treatment of chronic diseases: diseases that can be prevented, or managed more effectively. If we want to improve our economy, we need to bring greater efficiency and productivity to our healthcare expenditures.

We are asking all New Jersey businesses, labor unions, community organizations, non-profits and governmental entities to join with the Partnership to come together on this effort.

The mission of The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease is to:

- Challenge policymakers to make the issue of chronic disease a top priority and articulate how they will address the issue through their health care proposals.

- Educate the public about chronic disease and potential solutions for individuals, communities, and the nation.
- Mobilize Americans to call for change in how policymakers, governments, employers, health institutions and others approach chronic disease.

For local elected leaders, the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease is, in our view, a "political no-brainer." It is both good politics and good policy. By working together on the local, state and federal level, we can begin the process of creating healthy communities and provide economic and emotional relief to our constituencies.

For those of you have yet to consider signing onto the Mayors Wellness Campaign, we urge you to do so. A simple pledge is available online at [www.mayorswellnesscampaign.org](http://www.mayorswellnesscampaign.org). Membership costs you nothing, but the benefits can be invaluable. Through the Mayors Wellness Campaign, you can also become active in the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease.

Both the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease website and the Mayors Wellness Campaign website have simple "best practice" programs you can work

to implement in your own town. Some of the programs will not cost you a penny and can easily be linked to your own town's web page.

One of the examples you will see is an effort by the Mayor of Oklahoma City, Mike Cornett, who has challenged the residents of his city to shed 1 million pounds after they were ranked the 15th fattest city in the nation. Mayor Cornett actually set up a web site, [www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com](http://www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com) where residents can sign up and track their weight loss. In addition he is working to create more bike trails and a more pedestrian friendly city.

This is just one of the many examples of local leadership making a difference in the everyday lives of citizens.

Our collective voices and our collective actions will have an impact on policy makers at every level by raising awareness of chronic disease and its impact on health care spending. Today's situation is grave, but the health care crisis that awaits us in the future, looms even larger ...if we fail to act. ▲

James J. Florio served as Governor of the State of New Jersey from 1990-1994.

David L. Knowlton, a former Deputy Commissioner of Health, is President and CEO of the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute.



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