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Testimony Re: S0327 – Sugary Drinks Tax

Senate Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Senate Bill 0327 which would impose a tax of \$0.15 per ounce on the sale of bottled sugary drinks and syrups or powders from which a sugary drink may be derived for the purpose of depositing the amount of the tax collected into the Retail SNAP Incentive Fund to promote healthy food access and nutrition among SNAP recipients.

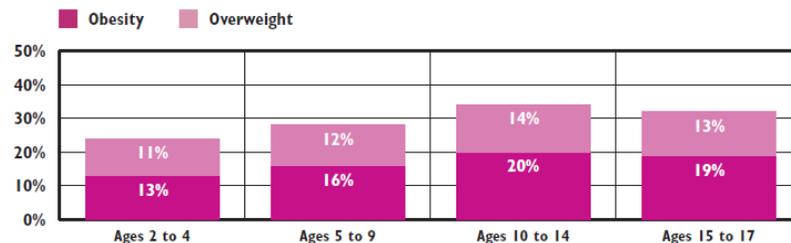
Childhood Obesity in Rhode Island

Imposing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages is a key method to addressing the upward trend in obesity among RI children. Children and adolescents who are overweight or obese are at immediate and/or long-term risk of many health problems, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, joint problems, sleep apnea, and other acute and chronic health problems. Over time, these conditions may contribute to a shorter lifespan. They may also experience social and psychological problems, including depression, bullying, and social marginalization. Obese children and youth are also more likely to repeat a grade, be absent from school, and have reduced academic performance than their peers.

Prior to 2018, Rhode Island did not have adequate clinical childhood BMI data. A recent study, led by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT in partnership with the Hassenfeld Child Health Institute, the RI Department of Health, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of RI, and the health plans, of 65,829 de-identified records with clinical and related billing code data from 2018 found that 13% of Rhode Island children ages two to 17 are overweight and 17% are obese. We are in the process of updating this data and will release 2019 data in our 2021 Factbook at our release next week.



Rhode Island Childhood Overweight and Obesity by Age, 2018



Source: Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute analysis of BMI clinical and billing records of children ages two to 17 in Rhode Island from KIDSNET, Current Care, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, and United Healthcare collected by the Department of Health, 2018.

The increased prevalence of childhood obesity is the result of complex interactions among many factors, including excess calorie consumption, genes, metabolism, behavior, environment, and culture. Low consumption of healthy foods, high consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and energy dense foods, low levels of physical activity, and high levels of screen time are all associated with obesity.

Increasing SNAP recipients' purchasing power

Hunger and lack of regular access to sufficient food are linked to serious physical, psychological, emotional, and academic problems in children and can interfere with their growth and development. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, helps low-income individuals and families obtain better nutrition through monthly benefits they can use to purchase food at retail stores and some farmers' markets. Child food insecurity has been shown to decrease by almost one-third after their families have received SNAP benefits for six months.

Of the 150,230 Rhode Islanders enrolled in SNAP in October 2019, 66% were adults and 34% were children. Of the children enrolled in SNAP, 35% were under the age of six. In October 2019, **the average monthly SNAP benefit for a family of three in Rhode Island was only \$393**. Establishing a retail SNAP incentive program would increase the purchasing power of low-income families and empower them to make healthier purchases while stretching their dollar.

Conclusion

Imposing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages and depositing the tax collected into the Retail SNAP Incentive Fund to promote food access and nutrition among SNAP recipients is a key strategy to promote the health and well-being of Rhode Island children and families. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Senator Lawson for sponsoring this important piece of legislation and her leadership on this issue. We encourage the committee to pass S0327.