



FAQ: HWCF-USAAC MOU Together Promoting Active Healthy Lifestyles

The Obesity Challenge

Q: Why are the U.S. Army and HWCF together today talking about obesity?

A: Obesity is arguably America's most serious national health issue—the problem that underlies so many chronic diseases and runaway health-care costs.

The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation wants to help consumers lead active, healthier lives by making energy balance—calories-in balanced with calories-out—a daily habit. The Army shares our concern, which makes for a natural partnership.

Q: What is the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation's interest in this issue?

A: The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation is dedicated to leading Americans to reduce obesity—especially childhood obesity—by 2015. We are a unique organization -- a first-of-its kind coalition that brings together more than 100 businesses, non profits and sports organizations – and now the US Army.

Q: Given the way obesity rates have been climbing, how realistic is it to expect to seriously reduce obesity levels?

A: We are seeing increased awareness of the problem, and growing interest in how to do something about it – especially among parents. The response to the First Lady's "Let's Move" initiative and the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation prove that. We started less than a year ago with fewer than 40 members. Our membership has more than doubled, and the level of activity aimed at promoting healthy living has increased dramatically.

Q: Why is energy balance so important?

A: Energy balance is crucial to reducing obesity because energy imbalance is the principal reason so many Americans today are overweight or obese. Quite simply, too many people are taking in too many calories – and not expending enough through

physical activity. The key to taking weight off – and keeping it off – is energy balance: Fewer calories in, more calories out.

The Memorandum of Understanding

Q: Why is the HWCF entering into this MOU?

A: Both organizations share a deep concern about the future of this country, especially the future of our young people. Both of us recognize that physical health is important to all aspects of our lives, and to America's future. And we recognize that childhood obesity poses a serious problem for the health and wellness of future generations.

Q: Is this really a natural fit – the Army and a bunch of food companies?

A: Working together to address the problem of obesity – especially childhood obesity – is a good fit for everyone who cares about America's future. Just look at how broad the membership of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation is – food and ingredient manufacturers, retailers and restaurants, non-profit organizations committed to recreation and public health, sporting goods manufacturers and retailers, the PGA, and even sports figures like Paul Pierce of the Boston Celtics. And now, the U.S. Army. This is a problem that everyone cares about and everyone has good reason to help solve.

Q: In what ways will the MOU specifically help to reduce obesity?

A: It will put in place a joint communications platform to support and promote solutions that help people (and especially children) achieve a healthy weight through energy balance, so they are not taking in more calories than they burn through physical activity (and normal growth for children.)

This communications platform will form a foundation for combined initiatives to support and promote solutions that help people achieve a healthy weight through an energy balance approach. That will include joint messaging through Op Ed pieces, web-based curriculum and social media. As well, the USAAC will attempt to integrate and synchronize HWCF's efforts with other federal entities, again to advance joint messaging.

This Memorandum of Understanding represents a big step in the effort to combat obesity. For the first time, a military organization has entered into a formal strategic alliance with the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation.

HWCF and the Obesity Challenge

Q: What other initiatives is the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation pursuing?

A: We're pursuing a wide range of activities – in the schools, the workplace, and the marketplace.

In the schools, for example, we participate in the Healthy Schools Partnership and have partnered with Discovery Education to create energy balance curriculum which promotes nutrition and physical activity education that will reach into 21,000 elementary schools and available free of charge online. In addition to the Discovery Education site, we are partnering in websites with Meredith Corporation and Parents magazine, offering free resources to help parents and teachers address child obesity.

In the workplace, we are promoting healthier eating and physical activity to the 1 million domestic employees of member companies. And we are partnering in a website with the National Business Group on Health, offering free resources to help small/midsized firms provide employee wellness programs.

In the marketplace, the food and beverage manufacturing members of the Foundation joined with the First Lady and the Partnership for a Healthier America in announcing a pledge to reduce annual calories by 1.5 trillion by the end of 2015, and sustain that level.

In the schools, the workplace, and the marketplace we are making it a priority to encourage healthier living through energy balance – fewer calories in, and more calories expended through healthy physical activity.

Challenges to Army Recruiting

Q: Specifically, what kind of impact is the increased proportion of overweight or obese Americans actually having on recruitment?

A: Of course, the problem does not just manifest itself in recruitment. It has impact on performance in the military – and it has impact throughout our society.

But recruitment is of course a concern of the USAAC. The growth of obesity is having a big impact on recruitment. A recent USAAC study by the Lewin Group found that of the American population aged 17-24, 9.3 million (or 29.3% of that demographic cohort) are unqualified for Military service wholly or partially because they are overweight. Of that population, approximately half are disqualified for being overweight and for additional medical reasons.

What's more, the problem is getting worse. Thirty years ago, not a single state had an obesity rate exceeding 20 percent. Now, every state but one has an obesity rate that is at least that high. And childhood obesity rates have more than tripled since 1980.

Of course, higher levels of obesity also increase the risk of disqualification of recruits for related medical reasons – such as diabetes or asthma. And it means the Army has to increase the resources expended to help individuals become qualified.

Our national security depends on a constant flow of dedicated, qualified, physically fit young people volunteering to serve our nation. We have to ensure that obesity does not turn off that flow.

Q: Aside from the impact on the recruit pool, how is the trend toward obesity in America showing up in the military itself?

A: We have seen dramatic increases of overweight members of both the Navy and the Air Force. The Marines remain the most fit and within weight standards.

Since 2003, the number of soldiers diagnosed by a medical professional as overweight has nearly doubled. Despite the fact that there has been a slight decline in overweight Soldiers under the age of 20, the largest population of Soldiers in the Army – ages 20-29 – are actually seeing a significant increase in the amount of overweight individuals. All branches of the service aside from the Marines are showing a considerable increase in this category.

Q: What impact do the higher levels of overweight participants have on the military?)

A: Obviously, it means many soldiers have a reduced ability to perform required tasks. Physical agility and strength aren't the only requirements of soldiering – intelligence, skills, commitment are all important. BUT the ability to move quickly, show agility, maintain good health – these are all crucial aspects of serving in the military.

An out-of-shape soldier is also more likely to sustain injuries, and find it harder to recover from the. They bear a higher risk of contracting a related disease. They are less likely to re-enlist, driving up attrition levels. And of course, more disease and more injuries equal higher health care costs.

For all of these reasons, America needs a military that is in the best possible shape – and we need a general population that is in the best possible shape.

Q: Based on the data you have, what trends show up regarding the military careers of individuals who access into the Army with a waiver for weight disqualification?

A: Right at the outset, they are less likely to graduate Initial Entry Training the first time through. They show higher attrition rates after 36 months. They are less likely to receive good conduct medal, less likely to make the E5 pay level by 48 months, and more likely to lose favorable personnel status.