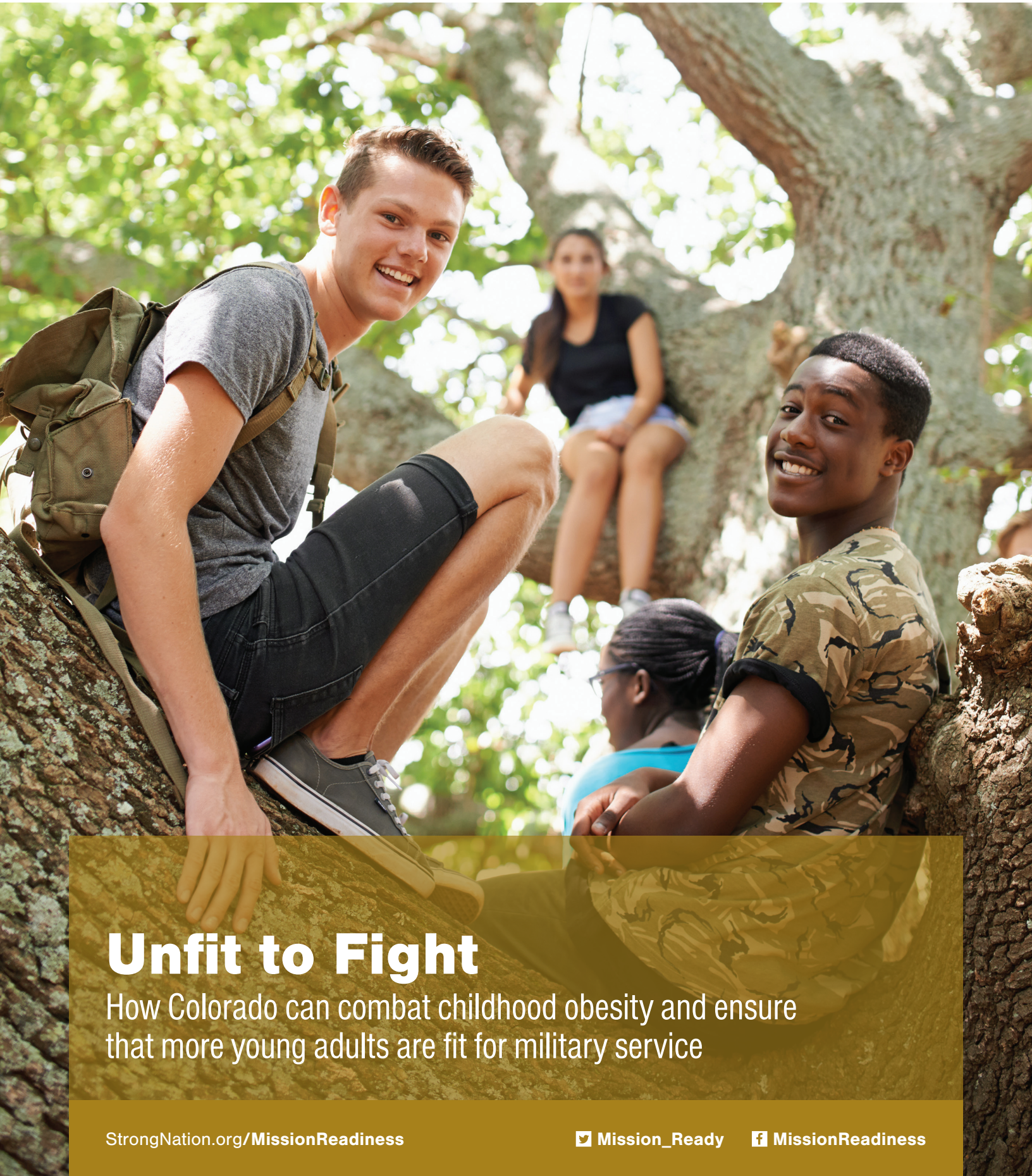




Unfit to Fight

How Colorado can combat childhood obesity and ensure that more young adults are fit for military service

Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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70%
of young adults in
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qualify for military
service

Summary

Low levels of physical activity and the obesity epidemic are contributing to an unprecedented readiness problem for our armed forces. According to Department of Defense data, 70 percent of young adults in Colorado, and 71 percent nationwide, would not qualify for military service.¹ Obesity is one of the primary reasons, disqualifying nearly one-third of young Americans.

As the leanest state in the nation for adults, Colorado can play a leading role in remedying the childhood obesity crisis and ensuring that more young adults have the option of military service. There are three immediate steps we can take as a state to give children the opportunity to live healthy lives and strengthen national security:

- Invest in active transportation to build **healthy communities**.

- Incentivize healthy food purchases to **build healthy families**.
- Improve physical education (PE) to build **healthy schools**.

Obesity prevents nearly one-third of young adults from serving in the U.S. military

Obesity not only affects individuals and communities, but also our national security. Obesity is one of the leading reasons why 71 percent of young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 would not qualify for military service.² Nearly one-third (31 percent) of these young adults would not qualify because they are too overweight. The other major reasons for disqualification are related to education, drug abuse, and crime.

Colorado has the ninth-highest active duty military participation in the country, with more than 35,300 active duty service members.³

The state also has roughly 13,100 reserve forces. Unfortunately, we face a potential shortage of healthy Coloradans to fill these positions and the nation's military ranks in the future. While Colorado has the lowest adult obesity rate in the nation, it is still unacceptably high: one in five adults is obese.⁴ Among Colorado children, the obesity rate is 14.5 percent and the overweight rate is 12 percent.⁵ Research shows that roughly 80 percent of children who are overweight in adolescence will become obese as adults.⁶ Therefore, Colorado's adult obesity rate may rise in the coming years.

A decline in physical activity and healthy eating are driving the obesity epidemic. Americans spend roughly half as much time on physical activity compared to 50 years ago.⁷ Today, only eight percent of adolescents in the U.S. get the expert-recommended hour of moderate or vigorous physical activity daily.⁸ In Colorado, only 28 percent of children get even 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity daily.⁹ At the same time, Americans' calorie consumption has risen dramatically.¹⁰ Now, 40 percent of children's diets are made up

of "empty calories" from solid fats and added sugars.¹¹

A three-point plan for Colorado to reduce childhood obesity and improve military readiness

1. Healthy Communities: Active Transportation

Five decades ago, walking and biking to school, a friend's house, or to the center of town was the norm. Nearly half of all children walked or biked to school in 1969. Now, only 13 percent use active modes of transportation on their way to school.¹² This sharp decline is due to a number of factors, including safety concerns, poor infrastructure (including an increasing number of roads without sidewalks), and increasing distances between schools and homes.¹³

Improved walking and biking routes can help reverse the decline. One study found that children who walked or biked to school gained 16 more minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity per day than children who were driven to school.¹⁴ That's more than a quarter of the amount of daily physical activity recommended by experts.

In order to improve children's activity levels, **Colorado lawmakers should include dedicated funding for bicycle and pedestrian projects in transportation appropriations.** They should also ensure a dedicated annual investment in the Safe Routes to School program, which has a track record of success. Fifty-nine of Colorado's 178 school districts have implemented Safe Routes to School projects since the program's inception in 2005, and some sites have reported 30 percent increases in the proportion of children walking or biking to school.¹⁵

Percent of Colorado children who are overweight or obese

Percent of Colorado children, ages 2 to 14 years, who were overweight or obese in 2013.



Source: Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (2015).

2. Healthy Families: Healthy Food Choices

Many families in Colorado have limited access to affordable, healthy food options. In fact, 12 percent of Colorado households are food insecure, meaning that they do not have adequate or nutritious food.¹⁶ Food insecurity is associated with obesity because it can increase consumption of cheap, sugar- and carbohydrate-laden foods and encourage cycles of food deprivation and overeating.¹⁷

Policymakers should support programs that provide assistance for families to purchase healthy foods. For example, Colorado's Double Up Food Bucks program encourages Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants to make healthy choices by providing an extra \$1 for fresh fruits and vegetables for every SNAP dollar spent (up to \$20 per visit).¹⁸ The program was launched in 2016 and so far has 90 participating locations.¹⁹

3. Healthy Schools: Physical Education

Over the past two decades, opportunities for physical activity during the school day have declined as schools cut physical education (PE) and recess.²⁰ Yet rigorous studies show that high-quality PE programs can improve children's physical fitness and reduce obesity. For example, one study found that adolescents who participated in **daily PE decreased their odds of becoming an overweight adult by 28 percent.**²¹ PE can also improve children's academic achievement. Another study demonstrated that incorporating physical activity into the school day significantly improved test scores in math, reading, and spelling.²²



Adolescents who participated in daily PE decreased their odds of becoming an overweight adult by 28 percent

While Colorado requires 600 minutes of physical activity per month for elementary school students (which can be achieved through recess, PE, or another format), it is one of three states that does not officially require PE at any grade level.²³ School districts do not uniformly require PE, either. A survey by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment found that only 13 percent of school districts

had a PE requirement in their wellness policies.²⁴

State and local officials should adopt rigorous standards and provide adequate funding for PE. PE must be high-quality to reduce obesity. School district leaders can ensure that PE is high-quality by requiring daily and weekly minutes of PE, requiring instructors to be licensed, and using an evidence-based curriculum.²⁵ Adequate funding is also necessary to expand the number of PE programs in Colorado and their quality. Local and state officials should prioritize PE when applying for and distributing Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, professional development funds, and Title I funds derived from the Every Student Succeeds Act.



**GEN. GREGORY
S. MARTIN**
U.S. AIR FORCE, RETIRED

“The information presented in this report is alarming. The obesity rate among Colorado children is 14.5

percent and roughly 80 percent of children who are overweight in adolescence are at risk of becoming obese as adults. This may result in Colorado’s adult obesity rate increasing in the future. With that in mind, I strongly believe that an investment in Colorado’s walking and biking infrastructure is an investment in the health and fitness of our communities, and would provide many of our young adults a better opportunity to serve in our nation’s Armed Forces, as well as in local, state and national law enforcement and investigative agencies.”

Conclusion

Obesity is a growing threat to our children and national security. In Colorado, 70 percent of young adults cannot qualify for military service. Nearly one in three young Americans is too overweight to serve. Colorado can lead the nation in reducing childhood obesity and improving military eligibility by building healthy families, schools, and communities.

In the immediate future, Colorado should prioritize investments in active transportation, healthy food choices for families, and high-quality physical education (PE) programs to help ensure that children grow up healthy and prepared for any career they choose, including military service.

Endnotes

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