



We build strong **PEOPLE**  
strong **FAMILIES** strong **COMMUNITIES**

YMCA Australia Submission to the National Preventative Health Taskforce  
on the Development of a National Preventative Health Strategy  
and Response to the Discussion Paper - *Australia: The Healthiest Country By 2020*

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## 1. Introduction

YMCA Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide our submission to the National Preventative Health Taskforce regarding the development of a National Preventative Health Strategy and our response to the Discussion Paper – *Australia: the healthiest country by 2020*.

While the YMCA acknowledges the importance of all three focal areas of the Taskforce, this submission will centre on the issues of enhancing health and wellbeing for all Australians and tackling overweight and obesity and the various initiatives proposed by the Taskforce in addressing this growing health issue.

The emerging obesity epidemic in Australia is an issue that remains of critical concern to the YMCA and we are very keen to continue our discussions with the Australian Government on the success of the YMCA in working with our partners and local communities to make health choices available and in delivering a range of programs and services to enhance the health and wellbeing of all Australians.

As one of Australia's leading not-for-profit health and wellness organisations, the YMCA has the capacity to provide a unique voice in representing the needs of communities and community recreation. The YMCA has extensive experience in working with local communities, building their capacity in addressing their own health and wellbeing needs. We are also committed to working with our partners to develop innovative solutions to the challenges presented by an ageing population and to those facing health inequalities due to their disadvantaged circumstances.

Despite the worrying trend of overweight and obesity in the community, particularly among young people, YMCA Australia believes that obesity and associated health issues can be successfully addressed within a framework of preventative health and social inclusion and the YMCA is encouraged by the Federal Government's proactive approach in this regard.

The YMCA also believes that tackling obesity and related health and wellness issues is not just about programs and activities, but about community development, individual and community capacity-building and providing opportunities for all people to be proactively engaged.

Please do not hesitate to contact us regarding any aspect of this submission or YMCA Australia programs and services.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Nicholson'.

Mr Bob Nicholson  
CEO  
YMCA AUSTRALIA

## 2. Summary of Recommendations

In the development and implementation of a National Preventative Health Strategy, YMCA Australia recommends that the Australian Government:

### Fundamental Principles

- Recommendation 1: commit to a whole-of-government response incorporating integrated initiatives that involve a range of portfolio areas including planning, transport, regional infrastructure, education, community and family services, indigenous affairs, health, ageing and sport;
- Recommendation 2: ensure that Federal and State initiatives are better coordinated and that health promotion messages are consistent across programs, populations and States;
- Recommendation 3: develop a National Preventative Health Charter with signatories from all governments, health providers and community organisations to demonstrate a coordinated and collaborative approach to health promotion and illness prevention;
- ‘Reshape industry supply and consumer demands towards healthier products’***
- Recommendation 4: introduce a tax offset based on eligible health and wellness expenses paid by parents to register a child in a prescribed program of physical activity (similar to the Children’s Fitness Tax Credit introduced by the Canadian Government in 2007<sup>1</sup>);
- Recommendation 5: review the applicability of the GST on health and wellness programs to allow for the provision of prescribed programs to be GST-free;
- Recommendation 6: broaden the criteria that apply to the implementation of Lifestyle Management Programs and Care Plans under the Medicare Benefits Scheme to registered health professionals including Exercise Physiologists;
- Recommendation 7: provide structural incentives for Private Health Insurers to engage with community organisations to provide a range of preventative health initiatives and disease management programs;
- ‘Protect children and others from inappropriate marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages’***
- Recommendation 8: undertake a national review of junk-food and fast-food advertising including the implementation of national standards and regulation;

<sup>1</sup> Canada’s New Government Establishes Program Eligibility for the Children’s Fitness Tax Credit (2006)  
<http://www.fin.gc.ca/news06/06-084e.html>

- Recommendation 9: critically review and address growing community concerns about the high level of reliance on the part of local sporting clubs and associations on funding and sponsorship from large fast-food companies;
- 'Improve public education and information'***
- Recommendation 10: in developing an effective educational media campaign to address issues of poor eating habits and lack of physical activity, the Australian Government ensure continued funding and support to locally responsive and targeted solutions;
- 'Embed physical activity and health eating in everyday life'***
- Recommendation 11: develop and implement national nutritional and physical activity guidelines for long-day care providers;
- Recommendation 12: undertake a critical review of school-based health and recreation programs, including enhanced resourcing and funding to improve integration of health education and active recreation in curriculum development;
- Recommendation 13: fund initiatives that provide a greater incentive for employers to engage their workforce in healthy and active recreation activities within the workplace to increase the health of employees, reduce time taken off due to illness, increase productivity and workplace morale and to attract and retain staff;
- Recommendation 14: review the GST and FBT legislation that currently applies to workplace health initiatives in an effort to make these programs and services more attractive for employers to implement;
- Recommendation 15: fund innovation in the not-for-profit sector at the local level as a critical strategy to tackle issues of obesity and its underlying causes and to promote a model of collaboration with local agencies and groups;
- Recommendation 16: re-focus policy and resources on community-based health, wellness and active recreation activities as building the foundation blocks of a healthy lifestyle for all Australians, including children and families;
- Recommendation 17: undertake a critical review of the ways in which funding from the Federal Government to National Sporting Organisations and their respective State Sporting Associations is structured to ensure that an appropriate level of sustainable funding is directed to local community-based sporting organisations that will achieve the aims of enhanced participation and sporting development at the community level;

- Recommendation 18: provide enhanced support to increase active recreation, not just to competitive sporting bodies to promote the message that it is just as healthy to exercise for fun, enjoyment and community participation as it is to compete;
- ‘Reshape urban environments towards healthy options’***
- Recommendation 19: critically review and re-examine models of funding between federal, state and local government bodies and to ensure that funding is delivering real and tangible results to grassroots community sporting and recreation organisations;
- Recommendation 20: invest in initiatives that promote organisational support and capacity-building through partnerships between local sporting organisations and larger not-for-profit organisations to ensure that local organisations can remain viable and responsive to local needs and that volunteers are appropriately supported;
- ‘Strengthen, skill and support primary health care to support people in making health choices’***
- Recommendation 21: invest in collaborative partnerships between leading local and national preventative health organisations and community-based providers of health and wellness programs and services;
- Recommendation 22: develop an initiative to enhance the referral pathways between primary health care professionals and community-based initiatives to ensure individuals are linked into programs prior to the development of serious illness;
- Recommendation 23: provide targeted funding to develop regional and rural ‘hubs’ that have a prevention and rehabilitation focus, bringing together local primary health care providers and community-based health and wellness services;
- ‘Improve Maternal and Child Health’***
- Recommendation 24: invest in the incorporation of health and wellness programs that provide opportunities for pregnant women and mothers of infants and young children to actively engage in health and wellness programs that enhance physical well-being and provide social and peer support;

***'Close the gap for disadvantaged communities'***

Recommendation 25: ensure that issues affecting people living with disability or mental illness are incorporated into the National Preventative Health Strategy;

Recommendation 26: provide enhanced and recurrent funding to tackle obesity and enhance participation in preventative health and wellness programs, including active recreation targeted at those groups in the community that are most in need such as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, people living with disability or mental illness, Indigenous communities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds;

***'Build the evidence base, monitor and evaluate effectiveness of actions'***

Recommendation 27: invest in initiatives that develop and enhance relationships between academic research institutions and providers of community-based health and recreation programs and services to provide evidence-based research promoting successful and locally responsive preventative health programs;

Recommendation 28: develop national standards and enhanced mechanisms of regulation for the health and wellness sector, including a commitment to national standards for training and accreditation of personal trainers and exercise physiologists.

### 3. YMCA Australia

#### *The YMCA is the largest provider of health and wellness services in Australia*

YMCA Australia is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that delivers programs and services to help build strong people, strong families and strong communities across Australia.

The YMCA operates in over 500 locations across Australia and during 2007 an estimated 2.2 million Australians accessed a YMCA facility or service.

The YMCA is the largest provider of health and wellness services in Australia. In 2007, there were over 6 million visits to a YMCA Health and Wellness program or service. As a Registered Training Organisation, we professionally train our 7,500 staff in industry best practice service delivery, the use of the most up-to-date equipment and offer the widest range of programs and services.

As a not-for-profit organisation, the YMCA has a commitment to ensuring our programs and services are accessible to all people and that no one will be prevented from participating in our programs due to an inability to pay.

### 4. YMCA Australia Philosophy on Health and Wellness

The YMCA is a passionate advocate of active, engaged lifestyles and believes that health and wellness goes beyond a medical-scientific model and encompasses the body, mind and spirit. YMCA Health and Wellness programs and services are developed with the clear intent of building strong people, families and communities.

Through our programs and services the YMCA purposefully provides opportunities for people to develop not just physical strength but also internal and external personal assets. A strong emphasis is also placed on social interaction and connection and the positive health benefits gained through a sense of belonging.

The YMCA has developed particular expertise in:

- working with communities to identify and address local health needs and social issues with targeted local responses;
- addressing health inequities by providing access to people facing disadvantage and narrowing the gap between the health-haves and the health-have-nots;
- consultation with community partners on health promotion initiatives;
- improving the settings in which we operate through the provision of health food choices in canteens and the promotion of healthy communities;
- group exercise programs;
- exercise prescription and program design;
- facility design and management;
- health screening (blood pressure checks, fitness testing);
- community education seminars and health promotion;

- older adults exercise programming; and
- teen exercise programming.

## 5. YMCA Health and Wellness Programs and Services

In the delivery of all YMCA programs, including our extensive health and wellness initiatives, the YMCA emphasises a family-focused approach whereby all members of the family have the opportunity to participate in recreational, fitness, sporting or aquatic activities together or to pursue their own activities of interest at the same 'community hub' - their local Y.

YMCA health and wellness programs and services are unique in their design to enable access for people living with disability or limited mobility and the capacity for the YMCA to create both the space and opportunity for social interaction and community connectedness.

All YMCA Associations work in partnership with local organisations and groups to ensure the particular and changing needs of local communities are met and that our health and wellness programs are reaching those most in need.

Some of our programs and services include:

### Health Club

Teen gym  
Express training  
Personal training  
Rehabilitation services  
Teen Yoga  
Sports conditioning

### Group Fitness

Step aerobics  
Body conditioning  
Low impact  
Older adults  
Yoga  
Walking Groups  
Tai Chi  
Fitness dance  
Pilates  
Circuit training  
Challenge Fitness Camp

### Health Services

Community Education  
Seminars  
Massage  
Nutrition  
Weight management  
Pre/post natal  
Blood pressure testing  
Corporate Health Programs

### Community Sport and Recreation

Gymnastics	Athletics competitions
Aquatics	Sports carnivals
Basketball	Squash
Netball	Tennis
Handball	Badminton
Indoor Soccer	Fun runs
Skate Parks	Triathlons

The YMCA is also one of Australia's largest providers of Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) and a number of other generalised programs that incorporate physical activity, health education and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.



## 6. YMCA Facts and Figures

The estimated total population within Australian YMCA catchment areas is 13.6 million (64% of the Australian population) and during 2007, an estimated **2.2 million** Australians accessed a YMCA facility or service.

### In 2007 in Australia the YMCA operated:

193	OSHC facilities
132	Stadiums
107	Outdoor Pools
81	Recreation Centers
63	Indoor Aquatic Recreation Centers
33	Health Suites
17	Childcare Centers
15	Camp Sites
10	Accommodation Facilities

### In 2007:

118,631	people went to a Y camp
83,392	people with special needs participated at a Y
44,537	people enrolled in Aquatic Education classes at any given time
34,131	people played in an indoor sports team
25,398	daily Childcare/OSHC places were offered
25,754	children were enrolled in gymnastics at any given time

<b>Our programs in 2007:</b>	<b>no. of sites</b>	<b>total participations</b>
<u>Youth</u>		
Youth Sports and Recreation	68	428,112
Teenage Holiday Programs	24	48,861
Youth Disability Programs	27	6,607
Skate Parks and Services	9	90,728
<u>Aquatics</u>		
Aquatic Education –Pre School	31	743,042
Aquatic Education Child	51	1,082,508
Aquatic Education Adult	38	45,024
Recreational Swimming	107	3,447,650
<u>Health and Wellness</u>		
Group Fitness	95	1,709,154
Health Clubs	105	4,867,842
Circuit Classes	50	90,100

## 7. YMCA Australia response to Proposed Priorities and Actions

Are the priorities for action appropriate? If you do not think they are appropriate, or have other suggestions, what would you propose we do as a nation to halt the toll of early deaths and disease caused by overweight and obesity?

The following section outlines the YMCA's response to initiatives proposed by the National Preventative Health Taskforce to achieve positive change in relation to escalating prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Australian community.

### PRIORITY 1

### Reshape industry supply and consumer demand towards healthier products

#### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Review the taxation system to enable access to healthier foods and recreation (e.g. increase tax breaks for fitness related products and recreational activities and for school and workplaces to provide healthy foods) and provide disincentives for unhealthy foods (e.g. consider increasing taxes for energy dense foods)

Regulate the amount of trans fats, saturated fat, salt and sugar content in foods

Provide subsidies for rural and remote area transport of fresh foods

YMCA Australia is highly supportive of a review of the taxation system to enable greater access to health and wellness programs for all Australians.

Our experience has demonstrated a clear and direct correlation between fees levied for participation and an increase in participation numbers in our health and wellness programs. Recognising that financial cost remains a barrier to participation for many Australians, the YMCA in Victoria operates the Open Doors initiative providing access to people facing disadvantage in our community.

During the last financial year more than 75 per cent of YMCAs in Victoria were actively raising funds and donations towards the Open Doors initiative with approximately 65 per cent of YMCAs providing access to people facing disadvantage through Open Doors. During 2007 to 2008, 1241 people accessed a range of health and wellness programs including aquatic education, gyms and camps through the Open Doors initiative. This represents more than a three-fold increase in requests for assistance from the previous year, demonstrating that in difficult economic times the YMCA is increasing its support for vulnerable people and contributing to reducing health related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity in our community.

In addition to this, in 2007-08 almost 32,000 people received discounted or reduced fees in order to ensure their access to programs and services in Victoria.

The YMCA also experienced a significant increase in aquatic education participation when the GST was removed from these programs.

This is also underpinned by our philosophical belief that the delivery of health and wellness programs (including fitness programs and products) is an essential community service that should be accessible to all people in our community. While the promotion of health and wellness is a shared responsibility of the individual, the community and Government, YMCA Australia is of the view that accessibility and availability of health and wellness programs must be facilitated and enhanced by Government initiatives.

A range of taxation incentives or offsets will also be of critical importance to non-profit providers of health and wellness programs, such as the YMCA, in order for us to continue to deliver essential services and programs to those at most in need in our community. This is particularly important in terms of ensuring that non-profit providers of health and wellness programs are able to remain competitive and accessible in a highly commercialised and

predominantly for-profit sector.

With growing concerns in the Australian community about broader economic issues, personal debt and financial stress facing many individuals and families, the provision of tax incentives for health and wellness programs will ensure that children and adults continue to have access to these critical services that promote health, wellness, active recreation and work towards the prevention of overweight, obesity and related health issues.

More specifically, YMCA Australia recommends:

- *the Australian Government consider the introduction of a tax offset based on eligible health and wellness expenses paid by parents to register a child in a prescribed program of physical activity (similar to the Children's Fitness Tax Credit introduced by the Canadian Government in 2007<sup>2</sup>); and*
- *the Australian Government consider reviewing the applicability of the GST on health and wellness programs to allow for the provision of prescribed programs to be GST-free.*

Under current legislation, programs that provide an educational component are exempt from GST with one such example being the delivery of Aquatic Education. YMCA Australia is of the view that all health and wellness programs are inherently educational, often providing nutritional education, physiological education and provide critical education and information enabling individuals to make life-long health promotion and disease prevention decisions.

YMCA Australia is also supportive of measures that place higher taxes on energy-dense, nutrition-poor food and beverage items that take place within a broader public education campaign. With regard to this, caution must also be taken to ensure that people living with socio-economic disadvantage or those living in regional and remote areas are not adversely affected by such changes to taxation on food items.

YMCA Australia would also like to recommend that in an effort to increase the breadth and capacity of the workforce that can be engaged to implement Lifestyle Management Programs and Care Plans enhancing preventative health, that the Australian Government:

- *consider broadening the criteria that applies to the implementation of Lifestyle Management Programs and Care Plans under the Medicare Benefits Scheme to registered health professionals including Exercise Physiologists; and*
- *give consideration to providing structural incentives for Private Health Insurers to engage with community organisations to provide a range of preventative health initiatives and disease management programs.*

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<sup>2</sup> Canada's New Government Establishes Program Eligibility for the Children's Fitness Tax Credit (2006)  
<http://www.fin.gc.ca/news06/06-084e.html>

## PRIORITY 2

## Protect children and others from inappropriate marketing

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Curb inappropriate advertising and promotion, including banning advertising of energy dense, nutrient poor foods during children's viewing hours

YMCA Australia is highly supportive of a national review of food and beverage advertising on television and marketing through other media including the increasing pervasiveness of alcohol and junk food advertising and in sponsorship of sport at all levels.

In particular YMCA Australia recommends:

- *the Australian Government commit to undertaking a national review of junk-food and fast-food advertising including the implementation of national standards and regulation.*

In addition to television advertising and marketing, YMCA Australia is also greatly concerned about the high level of fast-food marketing that is embedded in other aspects of children's and young people's lives. Of particular concern is the current reliance on the part of local sporting groups and associations on sponsorship from large commercial interests that do not have health and wellness promotion or disease prevention as their core values.

If the Federal Government is serious about tackling issues such as childhood obesity, then these 'negative partnerships' need a radical review. A lack of appropriate, sustained core funding for community-based active recreation and sporting organisations by government frequently forces these organisations into sponsorship agreements that are sending negative messages to participants and to the broader community. As a result, the YMCA strongly recommends that:

- *the Australian Government critically review and address growing community concerns about the high level of reliance on the part of local sporting clubs and associations on funding and sponsorship from large fast-food companies.*

Access to community-based sport, health and active recreation is a community health issue and should be the responsibility of Government. The provision of community-based sport and recreation should not be dependent on private enterprise, particularly those that do not have the enhancement of community health as their primary objective.

## PRIORITY 3

## Improve public education and information

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Develop effective national media advertising and public education campaigns to improve eating habits and levels of physical activity

As a national organisation with significant reach into local communities across a broad range of program and service delivery areas, the YMCA can play a significant role, working in partnership with Government to deliver positive messages about healthy living, nutrition and physical activity. This utilisation of community-connected organisations to deliver positive health and physical activity messages can work well in conjunction with federally funded national campaigns.

Enhance food labelling to support healthier choices, with simple information on trans fat and saturated fat as well as sugar and salt and standardised serve size

YMCA Australia agrees that campaigns and social marketing initiatives should be coordinated and integrated. This could be achieved through requirements within funding agreements.

The YMCA is concerned, however, about the level of duplication in campaigns and advertising across different states and territories and while we are supportive of federally-funded national awareness-raising initiatives such as the recent *'How Do You Measure Up?'* campaign, we would also like to reiterate the importance of funding locally-based solutions. We would like to recommend that:

- *in developing an effective educational media campaign to address issues of poor eating habits and lack of physical activity, the Federal Government ensure continued funding and support to locally responsive and targeted solutions.*

The experience of the YMCA has also demonstrated that when given a choice, young people will often choose energy dense, nutrition poor foods over healthier options. The introduction of healthy food policies at a number of our sites has enhanced the capacity of young people to make positive food choices.

## PRIORITY 4

## Embed physical activity and healthy eating in everyday life

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

#### School based programs

The YMCA knows that through our Healthy Kids Program that children experience better health outcomes when exercise and healthy eating advice are integrated.

##### Early Childhood

The YMCA incorporates our philosophy on health and wellness across all programs and services including our extensive range of children's services and we recommend:

- *the Australian Government commit to the development and implementation of national nutritional and physical activity guidelines for long-day care providers.*

##### School-aged Children

YMCA Australia has expressed concern for some time about the diminishing level of resources in the state school system to deliver adequately resourced and supported health, wellness and active recreation programs for Australian children. A growing number of schools are no longer delivering physical activity programs and that in many local communities, there are limited safe outdoor recreation areas for children to play and be active. YMCA Australia is concerned that Physical Education as a component of the school curriculum and a field of teaching is not valued. While the links between physical activity and health and academic achievement and readiness to learn are well known, YMCA Australia is concerned that this is not adequately reflected in curriculum development or resource allocation.

The YMCA believes that in tackling issues of overweight, obesity, decreased physical activity and poor nutrition among children and young people that a critical re-assessment of the ways that programs are delivered in the school environment must occur. YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government undertake a critical review of school-based health and recreation programs, including enhanced resourcing and funding to improve integration of health education and active recreation in curriculum development.*

Creating sustainable, enduring healthy life choices is critical for all Australians and the YMCA is actively engaged in partnership with local schools to deliver healthy living and active recreation programs designed to embed life-long decisions for children and young people to enhance their health over their life-span and prevent disease and disability associated with overweight, obesity, lack of physical activity and poor nutrition. This not only provides opportunities for physical activity and participation in sport, but also includes leadership and team-building activities and educational components focusing on nutrition and the development of life skills and positive decision-making.

The aim and objectives of YMCA programs in schools is also to build connection between schools, students and their local communities through:

- increasing their awareness and usage of local community recreation facilities;
- increase youth awareness of healthy eating and empower youth to develop healthy eating habits;
- establishing and promoting links between schools and sports clubs/associations; and
- forming inter-school links to plan and participate in physical activities.

## Workplace programs

While indicators of health and physical fitness vary across adults aged 25 to 64 years, research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showed that approximately two-thirds of males and 42 percent of females are overweight or obese, despite the majority of people (62 percent) undertaking some form of exercise for sport, recreation or fitness<sup>3</sup>.

Of particular concern is that a significant majority of adults (85 percent) do not meet the national guidelines for daily vegetable consumption and of this group almost half were overweight or obese, 61 percent exercised at low levels or were sedentary and 43 percent did not meet the guidelines for the daily consumption of fruit<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, YMCA Australia is concerned about the challenges of achieving a positive work-life balance for many adults and the time available, particularly for working parents, to participate in exercise and physical recreation activities.

The YMCA has recognised that many people spend eight hours or more a day at work and the workplace environment presents a unique opportunity for individuals to enhance their health and wellbeing.

A recent review of the literature by the Department of Human Services in Victoria concluded “There was strong to definitive evidence to support a number of interventions” in the delivery of workplace health and wellness programs.<sup>5</sup>

The YMCA delivers a number of corporate health and fitness programs that not only provide opportunities for physical activity and exercise, but involve nutritional education and awareness-raising components.

The YMCA also delivers programs and initiatives that encourage family groups to exercise and invest in the time and opportunity to participate in positive recreational activities together to meet the challenge that many working adults face in achieving and positive work-life balance.

YMCA Australia would like to recommend that:

- *the Australian Government commit to funding initiatives that provide a greater incentive for employers to engage their workforce in healthy and active recreation activities within the workplace to increase the health of employees, reduce time taken off due to illness, increase productivity and workplace morale and to attract and retain staff;*
- *the Australian Government review the GST and FBT legislation that currently applies to workplace health initiatives in an effort to make these programs and services more attractive for employers to implement.*

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.305-6

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.306.

<sup>5</sup> Bellew, B. (2008) *Primary prevention of chronic disease in Australia through interventions in the workplace setting: An Evidence Check rapid review* brokered by the Sax Institute (<http://www.saxinstitute.org.au>) for the Chronic Disease Prevention Unit, Victorian Government Department of Human Services.



## Community programs

### Funding innovation at the local level.

A critical element towards the success of a National Preventative Health Strategy is the need for a greater emphasis on increased funding for local communities. While funding for national awareness-raising campaigns is valuable, YMCA Australia is concerned that this might often occur at the expense of locally-based, locally-responsive initiatives. Funding for innovations, programs and services to enhance community health and wellbeing need to be directed to communities that are most in need and where particular gaps have been identified. In addition to nationally focused programs, the YMCA believes that it will be critical to develop successful and diverse local programs that can promote health and wellness from the grassroots level. The YMCA has a long history of effective engagement and commitment to meeting the needs of the local communities in which we work and have been highly successful in developing collaborative partnerships with local organisations and community groups. The success of these community partnerships is grounded in the role of the YMCA in capacity-building, organisational support and consultancy with community groups to ensure that local needs are met by a coalition of local groups.

In relation to the delivery of community-based initiatives towards the National Preventative Health Strategy, the YMCA recommends that:

- *the Australian Government fund innovation in the not-for-profit sector at the local level as a critical strategy to tackle issues of obesity and its underlying causes and to promote a model of collaboration with local agencies and groups.*

### Community-based health, wellness and active recreation

While acknowledging the positive role that elite sport can play, YMCA Australia considers the link between success at the elite level and increased participation in grassroots sport and active recreation to be overstated. We believe it is far more important for children and young people in our communities to have access to opportunities and well-supported programs.

Investment in elite sport should be proportional to our economy and population and should not come at the expense of community-based health and wellness programs or compromise our capacity to provide an appropriate level of resources into community-based health and active recreation activities.

We also hold the view that to date there has been a critical imbalance between the resources and support from the Federal Government for elite sporting achievement and that which has been directed towards the sustainable development of community-based sport and recreation. YMCA Australia is deeply concerned about this imbalance in relation to tackling issues such as childhood obesity and physical inactivity among young people.

YMCA Australia believes that the primary purpose of encouraging grassroots participation in community-based sports and active recreation should be to promote a healthy lifestyle and wellbeing and not to provide a base from which to produce elite sportspeople.

YMCA Australia also believes that enhancing opportunities for all Australians to participate in community-based sport and recreation activities is critical in the development of a National Preventative Health Strategy. While this will be a multi-faceted approach from the Federal Government, the YMCA strongly recommends that:

- *the Australian Government re-focus policy and resources on community-based health, wellness and active recreation activities as building the foundation blocks of a healthy lifestyle for all Australians, including children and families.*

Investment in preventative health measures that include community-based sport and active recreation will always present a positive cost benefit for the Federal Government and will also produce a more resilient and socially inclusive Australian community.

As part of the Federal Government's commitment to preventative health, all children should have access to community-based sport and recreation, regardless of where they live or their capacity to pay.

The YMCA is concerned about the capacity of current funding from the Federal Government through National Sporting Organisations and State Sporting Associations to deliver genuine enhancement of participation and sporting development at the local, community level.

YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government undertake a critical review of the ways in which funding from the Federal Government to National Sporting Organisations and their respective State Sporting Associations is structured to ensure that an appropriate level of sustainable funding is directed to local community-based sporting organisations that will achieve the aims of enhanced participation and sporting development at the community level..*

YMCA Australia is also aware that as major funding contributors to state and territory sporting organisations that State Government funding will also need to be part of this review.

YMCA Australia also recommends that:

- *the Australian Government provide enhanced support to increase active recreation, not just to competitive sporting bodies to promote the message that it is just as healthy to exercise for fun, enjoyment and community participation as it is to compete.*

## PRIORITY 5

## Reshape urban environments towards healthy options

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Facilitate adoption of consistent town planning and general building design that encourage greater levels of physical activity

Promote and support re-orientation of urban obesity-promoting environments through appropriate infrastructure investments

#### The Role of Local Government

The YMCA recognises that local government is struggling with support for infrastructure at the community level and bears a disproportionate level of the cost in terms of providing resources for health and wellness activities, community-based sport and recreation. As a result, many local Councils and Shires are placed in a position whereby they are required to charge fees for sporting and recreation services, even the use of local parks by small groups for exercise or preventative health programs. This has inevitably resulted in decreased accessibility and decreased participation at the local level.

With diminishing levels of infrastructure support for local sporting club facilities, many are falling into disrepair, which acts as another significant barrier to participation.

The experience of the YMCA in working with a number of local councils including the City of Darebin and the City of Moonee Valley in Victoria, demonstrates that when the quality of facility infrastructure is improved then participation in community sport and recreation increases significantly.

YMCA Australia strongly recommends that:

- *the Australian Government critically review and re-examine models of funding between federal, state and local government bodies and to ensure that funding is delivering real and tangible results to grassroots community sporting and recreation organisations.*

The Federal Government needs to ensure that appropriate funding linked to a social inclusion requirement is provided to local government guaranteeing access for all in the community. Local government must be able to demonstrate that health and wellness activities, programs and services are accessible to all in the community at a grassroots level. Local authorities in the UK, for example, are now providing free access to swimming pools for certain groups in the community to encourage greater participation in sport<sup>6</sup>. By 2012, the aim of this initiative is to provide free access to all people.

Local government is at the forefront of community infrastructure and community strengthening. Support for the role of local government in community health and wellbeing should be seen as a central component of preventative health strategies.

#### Organisational Capacity-Building

Tasks for community sport and recreation organisations are often onerous and are predominantly the responsibility of volunteers. There is a clear role for organisations such as the YMCA in providing mentoring and capacity-building assistance for smaller community-based sporting organisations, particularly with regard to facility management and financial administration. The Federal Government could enhance this role by providing greater resources to facilitate such collaborative and sustainable partnerships. This is particularly important in rural and regional areas where there is a critical lack of sustainable support for local sporting organisations that are often the central social and cultural thread of the community. There is often a

<sup>6</sup> *Free swimming to be a 2012 legacy*, BBC News Online, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7439182.stm>

duplication in management and administration that creates a burdensome workload for committed community volunteers.

As part of the National Preventative Health Strategy, YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government commit to investing in initiatives that promote organisational support and capacity-building through partnerships between local sporting organisations and larger not-for-profit organisations to ensure that local organisations can remain viable and responsive to local needs and that volunteers are appropriately supported.*

The YMCA is often viewed as a 'community hub' and we currently play a non-profit management role, bringing both professionalism and accountability as a central health, sporting and recreational 'hub' in local communities working towards the sustained capacity-building of local sporting clubs and community-based health and recreation organisations.

The Federal Government could consider supporting a more efficient model of community-based management in which 'back office' operations such as administration, payroll and insurance are undertaken in a collaborative manner, while ensuring that local health and recreation organisations continue to be run by the local community.

## PRIORITY 6

## Strengthen, skill and support primary health care and the public health workforce

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Expand supply of relevant allied health workforce (e.g. nutritionists)

Develop and disseminate evidence-based clinical guidelines and other multidisciplinary training packages for health and community workers

The experience of the YMCA in partnership with the National Stroke Foundation delivering the 'Know Your Numbers' blood pressure testing campaign demonstrates that when leading health organisations partner with organisations that have a local community presence the participation outcomes are increased significantly.

#### Strategic Partnerships with Leading Health Organisations

In addressing issues of obesity and related health concerns, YMCA Australia's approach is not just about delivering a programmatic response, but continuing to enhance our existing relationships with organisations at the local and national level such as the National Stroke Foundation, Nutrition Australia, Diabetes Australia, VicHealth and Victoria University. The YMCA believes these linkages will play a critical role in the development of a National Preventative Health Strategy. As an organisation with national reach, the YMCA is ideally situated to play a significant role in partnering with these organisations to deliver a range of preventative health programs. Successful examples of programs that we currently deliver include the diabetes weight check program in over 80 communities throughout Victoria and the National Stroke Foundation blood pressure testing to a similar number of communities. These programs and collaborative relationships build on the success of previous community-based initiatives and aim to strengthen communities and enhance engagement in healthy lifestyles and active recreation, particularly in targeting communities at most disadvantage.

YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government makes a greater commitment to investing in collaborative partnerships between leading local and national preventative health organisations and community-based providers of health and wellness programs and services.*

#### Partnerships with Primary Health Care Providers

YMCA Australia also believes the development of a National Preventative Health Strategy provides an opportunity for the Federal Government create a greater level of connectivity between providers of primary health care services and those in the broader health and wellness sectors. This includes an integrated approach incorporating collaborative partnerships between General Practitioners, Community Health Centres, allied health professionals and community-based initiatives that promote health and wellness. As part of the National Preventative Health Strategy, the YMCA recommends that:

- *the Federal Government develop an initiative to enhance the referral pathways between primary health care professionals and community-based initiatives to ensure individuals are linked into programs prior to the development of serious illness.*

In rural and regional areas, the YMCA has also successfully partnered with local primary health care providers to deliver rehabilitation and preventative health programs. This has involved the YMCA working in conjunction with local hospitals, community health centres and GPs to develop taskforces and working groups that have a particular focus such as cardiac rehabilitation, obesity prevention and diabetes. To further enhance the delivery of preventative health programs in regional and rural areas, the YMCA recommends that the Federal Government:

- *consider the provision of targeted funding to develop regional and rural 'hubs' that have a prevention and rehabilitation focus, bringing together local primary health care providers and community-based health and wellness services.*

## PRIORITY 7

## Improve Maternal and Child Health

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Promotion of 2003 NHMRC Infant Feeding Guidelines for Health Workers

YMCA Australia believes that a holistic approach to maternal and child health including a range of prenatal and postnatal health and wellness programs. The YMCA delivers a range of programs to support new mothers providing opportunities for socialisation, peer support and physical activity

In acknowledgement of increased social and medical awareness about the causes and potential impacts of post-natal depression, community-based programs can provide time and opportunity to engage in playgroups, new mothers' groups, access occasional care and other programs which connect new mothers with their local community. YMCA delivers a range of these services which help to prevent a sense of isolation and ensure that new mothers have access to various points of entry into existing community support systems. For first-time parents, community-based programs provide valuable time to focus on the intense learning experience of becoming a parent and effectively managing and dealing with the related emotional and social changes.

YMCA programs and services afford women the time and opportunity to re-engage with fitness, sporting and/or other recreational activities that they may have been involved in prior to or during pregnancy. These activities may also involve group exercise, swimming or walking groups that bring new mothers together. In addition to the obvious physical health benefits, these opportunities can provide mothers with some valuable 'time out' from the demands of small infants and a healthy way of connecting with other mothers as a means of emotional support. The YMCA offers a range of these programs and many YMCA facilities incorporate childcare to further enhance the participation of new mothers.

In developing the National Preventative Health Strategy, YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government invests in the incorporation of health and wellness programs that provide opportunities for pregnant women and mothers of infants and young children to actively engage in health and wellness programs that enhance physical well-being and provide social and peer support.*

## PRIORITY 8

## Close the gap for disadvantaged communities

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Support ongoing research on effective strategies to address social determinants of obesity in Indigenous and low-income communities

Through our involvement in outdoor adventure camping with young adults with a mental illness, the YMCA has demonstrated that participation in regular physical activity can have significant improvements in mental and physical health.<sup>7</sup>

YMCA Australia is concerned that issues affecting those living with disability and mental health issues have not been adequately addressed by the Discussion Paper and proposed initiatives. The strength of the National Preventative Health Strategy will be reliant on the strategy and related initiatives being developed within a social inclusion framework.

YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government commits to ensuring that issues affecting people living with disability or mental illness are incorporated into the National Preventative Health Strategy.*

Rates of obesity among people with intellectual disability can be three times that of the broader population, yet preventative health initiatives and programs have largely ignored the health support needs of those living with disability<sup>8</sup>. Rates of obesity for people living in the community have been documented at 56 percent in men and up to 73 percent of women with the figures being even higher for people with Down Syndrome<sup>9</sup>.

Some of the key issues facing people with disability that may contribute to weight gain or obesity include<sup>10</sup>:

- a particular medical condition that affects the body's metabolism;
- reduced mobility and lack of regular exercise;
- reduced muscle tone (making it difficult to exercise);
- medications that may increase appetite;
- eating habits that may be affected by depression, anxiety, boredom or frustration;
- dependence on family members or carers to provide meals;
- reduced levels of self-motivation
- lack of access to transport;
- restricted access to employment;
- limited income; and
- poor knowledge of nutrition and weight management.

<sup>7</sup> Independent research conducted by Orygen Youth Health Research Centre 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Vardaro, T., (2005); *Disability and Diversity – A Paradigm Shift*; Presentation on behalf of the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA) to the Diversity in Health Conference, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Bell, B. and Bhate, M. (1992) as cited in Durvasula, S. and Beange, H. (2001); *Health Inequalities in People with Intellectual Disability: Strategies for Improvement*; Health Promotion Journal of Australia, April 2001, Vol 11, No 1.

<sup>10</sup> Victorian Department of Human Services (2008); Fact Sheet: Disability – Managing Overweight and Obesity, viewed 29/07/08 at [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/BHCv2/bharticles.nsf/pages/Disability\\_managing\\_overweight\\_and\\_obesity?OpenDocument](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/BHCv2/bharticles.nsf/pages/Disability_managing_overweight_and_obesity?OpenDocument)



With regard to enhancing the opportunity, access and participation in community-based sport and recreation for people with living with disabilities and community-based sporting programs targeting greater participation within Indigenous communities, the Federal Government must ensure appropriate levels of funding are available to community organisations to enable them to 'reach out' to these and other marginalised, isolated or disadvantaged groups in the community. Some projects for 'high need' groups are generally funded on an annual basis where in reality there is a critical need for recurrent three to four year funding to build the capacity, success and sustainability of some of these specialised, high intensity programs that also require the recruitment and retention of staff with specialised training. In this respect, it will be essential for the Federal Government to implement the development of funding models that go beyond annual funding and move towards recurrent funding in order for community organisations to build capacity and plan strategically for the implementation of intermediate and long-term programs.

The Australian Government could raise their level of support for disadvantaged groups in providing targeted funding to enhance opportunity, access and participation in preventative health and wellness programs for people living with disability, indigenous people, women, people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, funding models should be structured such that three to four year recurrent funding is provided to ensure that intermediate to long-term strategic planning can take place.

YMCA Australia recommends that:

- *the Australian Government provide enhanced and recurrent funding to tackle obesity and enhance participation in preventative health and wellness programs, including active recreation targeted at those groups in the community that are most in need such as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, people living with disability or mental illness, Indigenous communities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.*

## PRIORITY 9

## Build the evidence base, monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of actions

### PROPOSED ACTIONS

Develop a national research agenda for overweight and obesity

While YMCA Australia recognises the central role of research in delivering a successful National Preventative Health Strategy and are supportive of a research agenda on issues of overweight and obesity, we would also like to encourage a greater level of research exploring and promoting successful, local, community-based strategies.

Highlighting models of best practice in preventative health and active recreation that have a population-wide focus, but also the capacity to target localised and diverse community need will be a critical element in the National Preventative Health Strategy. As part of a national research agenda, the YMCA would like to recommend that:

- *the Federal Government invest in initiatives that develop and enhance relationships between academic research institutions and providers of community-based health and recreation programs and services to provide evidence-based research promoting successful and locally responsive preventative health programs.*

Ensure safe industry practices

Develop a national food strategy (similar to the UK model Food Matters)

As one of Australia's leading providers of not-for-profit health and wellness programs and services, YMCA Australia is committed to ensuring that we deliver best practice programs that are underpinned by strict health and safety standards.

We are also concerned about the lack of regulation with regard to the training and accreditation of some personnel in the health and fitness sectors such as personal trainers and exercise physiologists. YMCA Australia believes that a national minimum standard of qualification for industry accreditation should be a Certificate IV in Fitness. To encourage higher professional standards in the sector and to generate incentives for employers and those wishing to pursue a career in preventative health, the YMCA would be supportive of a system of fee subsidies for the training and accreditation of personnel.

YMCA Australia is concerned that adherence to standards of best industry practice across the diversity of health and wellness sectors is not occurring in a consistent manner and we would be highly supportive of a recommendation that:

- *the Federal Government commit to the development of national standards and enhanced mechanisms of regulation for the health and wellness sector, including a commitment to national standards for training and accreditation of personal trainers and exercise physiologists.*

## 8. Conclusion

With growing concern on the part of parents, health professionals and the broader community, the issue of increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity is one which is rising in the public consciousness and is high on the political agenda. As such, the issue of obesity can no longer be seen as purely a health concern, but must also be addressed as a social and economic issue.

Addressing the core drivers and indicators of social and economic disadvantage will provide long-term solutions to obesity and other related health issues – solutions that are located in a framework of social inclusion.

There also needs to be a critical shift in public policy thinking and in the funding and development of services and programs towards preventative health – this will be crucial not only from a disease prevention perspective, but also from an economic standpoint.

While obesity is an issue of concern for all people in the community, there is a particular need to re-focus preventative efforts for sections of the community that are at greatest risk. Measures to address obesity will need to be particularly focused on those experiencing the greatest levels of social exclusion and those whose voices are silent – Indigenous Australians, people living with disability, people living with mental illness, older isolated people in our community and people living in social and economic disadvantage.

Initiatives to address obesity need to be about choice, opportunity and empowerment where localised solutions allow communities to have input into programs and initiatives.

YMCA Australia is ideally situated as a partner with community and Government in developing local solutions that are grounded in expertise, best practice and sustainable community development and we look forward to further opportunities for engagement in this regard.