

## Obesity efforts touted

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AUGUSTA -- Maine has the highest rate of obesity in New England, a statistic lawmakers and health advocates say they want to address with a three-pronged approach.

"It's estimated that 30 percent of our youth are overweight or obese," said Gov. John Baldacci. "This is a critical public health issue, especially when it comes to our children's health."

Baldacci, House Speaker Hannah Pingree, D-North Haven, and public health advocates met Wednesday to highlight three new state laws aimed at curbing obesity.

Pingree sponsored the most controversial measure, which requires chain restaurants to post calorie information on their menus and menu boards.

She said polls conducted in New York City after a similar measure was put in place showed 80 percent of respondents said they changed their behavior based on calorie information provided in conspicuous locations.

"States like Maine taking action are causing the fast-food industry to come to the table and say OK, it's time," she said. "It's not the silver bullet that will fix everything, but I think it's really important and basic information."

The Maine Medical Association, Maine Dietetic Association, Maine Heart Association and Maine Stroke Association all sent representatives to the ceremony to express their support for the bills.

"Obesity is second only to smoking as a preventable cause of death in the United States," Dr. Stephanie Lash, president of the Maine Medical Association said in a statement. "The Maine Medical Association wholeheartedly supports providing calorie information on menus and menu boards at the point of purchase."

Baldacci said as a further step, he'd like to encourage small restaurants in Maine not covered by the bill to voluntarily post calorie information.

The other laws highlighted Wednesday took a school-based approach to the problem.

House Whip Seth Berry, D-Bowdoinham, sponsored a measure that creates an Obesity and Chronic Disease Fund to pay for training or staff to increase physical education in elementary schools.

The law also requires the state Department of Education to assess physical education programs already in place.

"We're going to gather data about what we know and don't know about gym times in schools," he said.

A third law, sponsored by Rep. Helen Rankin, D-Hiram, will require schools to take the height and weight measurements of children and report that data to the Maine Center for Disease Control. The information would remain confidential, but Rankin said she hopes it will help children and parents realize the seriousness of obesity.

Rankin, who worked in school food service for nearly 50 years, said obesity leads to childhood diabetes and other illnesses.

"I think these three bills together are a form of preventative medicine," she said.

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