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Dear Committee Secretary

**RE: Submission to the Select Committee into the Obesity Epidemic in Australia**

The Obesity Epidemic is one of the most serious health challenges of our time

Australians are getting fatter, our nation is experiencing an epidemic of preventable chronic disease, and alarmingly, this trend shows no signs of abating. Rising obesity rates cost Australian tax payers billions of dollars every year in burgeoning health care expenses, lost productivity, and reduced quality of life and prosperity.

Moreover, overweight and obesity have a significant impact on the Australian economy<sup>1</sup>. In 2015, PwC estimated obesity cost the economy \$8.6 billion in direct (e.g. higher healthcare costs) and indirect costs (e.g. productivity losses, carer costs, welfare payments, forgone taxation revenue), and that if no further action was taken to address obesity, there would be \$87.7 billion in additional costs due to obesity over the next decade to 2025<sup>2</sup>.

While over two thirds of Australian adults are overweight or obese, our children are particularly vulnerable, with one in four (27%) Australian children aged two–17 years either overweight or obese<sup>3</sup>. By 2025, it is estimated this will increase to one in three children<sup>4</sup>. Overweight and obese children are also more likely to become obese adults, and to develop chronic conditions at younger ages, including cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes<sup>5</sup>.

Childhood obesity has become one of the world's most serious health challenges, with some experts claiming children today may be the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents<sup>6,7</sup>. Our future as a healthy and prosperous nation is under threat.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, *A picture of overweight and obesity in Australia 2017*. Cat. no.PHE 216. , AIHW, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> PwC Australia 2015, *Weighing the cost of obesity: a case for action*, PwC Australia, Australia.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, *National Health Survey: first results, 2014–15*. ABS cat no. 4364.0.55.001, ABS, Canberra.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Human Services 2008, *Future prevalence of overweight and obesity in Australian children and adolescents, 2005-2025*, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, *A picture of overweight and obesity in Australia 2017*. Cat. no.PHE 216. , AIHW, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organisation 2012, *Prioritizing areas for action in the field of population-based prevention of childhood obesity: a set of tools for Member States to determine and identify priority areas for action*, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2018, *Vichealth physical activity strategy 2018-2023*, Vichealth, Melbourne.



### The YMCA is committed to playing its part in addressing obesity

YMCA is a community not-for-profit with a rich history in helping Australians lead healthier and happier lives. As one of the nation's largest health promoting organisations, we have been working with government, corporate and community partners for more than 150 years to achieve meaningful, measurable health outcomes for Australians.

The YMCA has long been an advocate for helping people to live healthier, happier lives and enjoy the benefits of physical activity. Through our advocacy, the Y aims to influence public policy, funding and legislation to support healthy living and the prevention of lifestyle-related illness, particularly childhood obesity. The prevalence of overweight and obesity in young Australians is too high and on a dangerous trajectory. In collaboration with our government and community partners, the YMCA is committed to addressing this issue.

In Australia, the YMCA is made up of 19 Member Associations supporting over 741 communities across every State and Territory. Each year we record 30 million participations in our programs and services across the country. This includes 20 million health club participations and 4.3 million swimming lessons a year. Our children's services, which include kindergartens, early learning centres, outside school hours care and vacation care, attract almost 3 million participations a year.

### Healthy Food at the Y

The YMCA has committed to improving our food and beverage landscape. Beginning in Victoria, our healthy and food and beverage policy has seen a significant increase in healthy choices, and a reduction in unhealthy options, in every setting where we sell, prepare and provide food and drinks. This includes completely removing sugar-sweetened beverages, including sports drinks, from over 65 YMCA-managed community recreation and aquatic centres. We aim to model and promote healthy eating to the communities we work with, particularly children, and we are actively encouraging other providers in community settings to adopt similar practices.

### Physical Activity and Physical Literacy at the Y

The YMCA has a long and proud history of getting more people, more active, more often by offering programs and services for all ages and all abilities. We believe laying the foundations for a healthy and active life in childhood is vital. Our programs and services are focused on providing children with the skills and competencies that support life-long participation in physical activity.

### We need our leaders to act now to address Australia's obesity epidemic

While the YMCA, like many other community service providers, is doing what we can to help curb Australia's rising rates of obesity, this is not enough. We need the Australian Federal Government to provide leadership and tackle the issue head on. This includes providing a comprehensive Obesity Strategy and Framework to enable and support action across all levels of government, sectors and industries.

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The World Health Organisations Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity states:

*Governments bear the ultimate responsibility for ensuring their citizens have a healthy start in life. Preventing childhood obesity requires the coordinated contributions of all governmental sectors and institutions contributing to policy development and implementation. Resources need to be dedicated to policy implementation and workforce capacity strengthening.*

If Government does not act, obesity-related diseases will continue to increase. Urgent action is needed to improve the health of our nation and ensure healthy and prosperous future generations.

The YMCA endorses the recommendations of the [Tipping the Scales](#) report: eight clear, practical, evidence-based actions the Australian Federal Government must take to reduce the enormous strain excess weight and poor diets are having on the nation's physical and economic health, including:

1. Legislation to implement time-based restrictions on exposure of children (under 16 years of age) to unhealthy food and drink marketing on free-to-air television up until 9:30pm.
2. Setting clear reformulation targets for food manufacturers, retailers and caterers with established time periods and regulation to assist compliance if not met.
3. Make adjustments to improve the Health Star Rating System, and make mandatory by July 2019.
4. Developing and funding a comprehensive national active travel strategy to promote walking, cycling and use of public transport.
5. Funding high-impact, sustained public education campaigns to improve attitudes and behaviours around diet, physical activity and sedentary behaviour.
6. Placing a health levy on sugary drinks to increase the price by 20%.
7. Establishing obesity prevention as a national priority with a national taskforce, sustained funding, regular and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of key measures and regular reporting around targets.
8. Developing, supporting, updating and monitoring comprehensive and consistent diet, physical activity and weight management national guidelines.

We urge the Select Committee to recommend that these eight actions are taken as a priority so that all Australians, including our children, have the best opportunity to live healthy and productive lives.

Yours faithfully

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