



Submission No. 129

(Inq into Obesity)

RC 2518/08

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13 August 2008

Secretariat
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
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Dear Sir / Madam,

YMCA Australia would like to present our submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing *Inquiry into Obesity in Australia* and we welcome the opportunity to provide a late submission to the Inquiry.

We hope this submission provides the Committee with detailed information regarding the innovative and successful programs and initiatives provided by the YMCA that successfully address both the causes and impacts of obesity across all groups in our community.

We would also greatly welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of our submission with the Committee, should this be required.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Cox'.

Nick Cox, Acting CEO
YMCA Australia



YMCA Australia

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing

Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

August 2008

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1. Introduction

YMCA Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide our submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing *Inquiry into Obesity in Australia*.

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 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 need 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.

While there have been overall improvements in the health of Australians and a small improvement in the rate of adult obesity, Australia remains ranked in the 'worst third' of OECD countries regarding obesity rates¹. On all other health indicators we are ranked in the 'middle third' or 'top third' of OECD countries.

Despite this worrying trend, 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.

In acknowledgement of the broad range of submissions already received by the Committee, YMCA Australia would like draw the Committee's attention to a number of specific issues affecting our clients, programs and services. We would also like to take this opportunity to brief the Committee on the success of the YMCA approach and our innovative and successful programs to address obesity and related health issues.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.



2. Summary of Recommendations

In order to address the issues of obesity and related health issues for all Australians, YMCA Australia recommends that:

- Recommendation 1: 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.
- Recommendation 2: 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.
- Recommendation 3: the Australian Government enhances the level and sustainability of funding for community-based sport and commit to ongoing support for community-based, non-profit sporting clubs and recreational activities.
- Recommendation 4: through the COAG National Reform Agenda, a greater level of cooperation between State and Commonwealth Governments is achieved in relation to support for community-based, non-profit sporting clubs and recreational activities.
- Recommendation 5: the Australian Government commit to ongoing funding of community-based sport that specifically targets the transitional stages between age groups with an emphasis on family-focus.
- Recommendation 6: the Australian Government critically review and address growing concerns about the high level of reliance on the part of community-based sporting organisations on funding and sponsorship from large fast-food companies.
- Recommendation 7: the Australian Government commit to undertaking a national review of junk-food and fast-food advertising including the implementation of national standards and regulation.
- Recommendation 8: the Australian Government commit to the development and implementation of national nutritional and physical activity guidelines for long-day care providers.
- Recommendation 9: as part of the National Preventative Health Strategy, 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.



- Recommendation 10: as part of the National Preventative Health Strategy and COAG National Reform Agenda, the Australian Government commit to initiatives that will ensure the specialised needs of people living with mental illness or disability are acknowledged and addressed in relation to the high rates of obesity affecting these individuals.
- Recommendation 11: the Australian Government implement a National Active Families Challenge targeting 50,000 families (based on the Victorian Premier's Active Families Challenge).
- Recommendation 12: the Australian Government commit to an evaluation and re-invigoration of the Active After Schools Program to ensure a model is developed which encourages life-long participation in physical activity.



3. YMCA 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. The YMCA 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;
- 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

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).

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

Our programs in 2007:

	no. of sites	total participations
<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. Key Issues for different groups:

7.1 Children

The most recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare² indicates that almost three out of every ten children and young people in Australia are overweight or obese.

Research has also shown that for children aged 12 to 14 years, only 26 percent meet the national guidelines for daily fruit consumption (three serves per day) and 28 percent meet the guidelines for daily intake of vegetables (four serves per day)³.

While there is no recent comprehensive national data on the levels and patterns of physical activity in children and young people, research conducted in NSW and WA showed that between one-quarter and one-third of school children were not undertaking sufficient physical activity⁴.

There is a clear need to increase the physical activity levels of children and a greater need to enhance the level of education on the part of children and their parents about nutrition and health eating, there are also growing concerns about the capacity of some Australian families to achieve this. Families living in remote areas can experience difficulty in accessing fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis, which is a reflection of a broader trend regarding rising levels of food insecurity. Additionally, many Australian families are experiencing an increasing strain on family budgets through rising living costs which may have a negative impact on both exercise participation and healthy eating.

There is also growing concern that a 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 is greatly concerned about the high level of reliance on the part of community-based sport on funding and sponsorship from large fast-food companies and urges the Government to critically review this situation.

YMCA Australia urges the Government to enhance the level and sustainability of funding for community-based sport and government support for community-based, non-profit sporting clubs and recreational activities. Largely run by volunteers and parents, these community organisations require a re-focus of Government on the value of community-based support in order to be sustainable. The YMCA also urges a greater level of cooperation between the Commonwealth, State and Local governments in this regard.

The YMCA also supports other concerned organisations and parents in the community in calling for a review of junk-food and fast-food advertising including implementation of national standards and regulation.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.13.

³ 2004-05 National Health Survey (ABS cat. no. 4364.0) data as cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.293.

⁴ Booth et al. 2006; Hands et al. 2004 as cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 153.



The YMCA's response:

- The YMCA delivers programs which enhance the knowledge and capacity of parents in relation to nutritional education of their children and support parents in their efforts to provide healthier diets for their children.
- The YMCA also delivers a range of programs that enhance relationships between parents and their young children which deliver educational components focused on health and wellbeing (**see Case Study 2: MEND Program**).



7.2 Young people

In 2004-05, 29 percent of young people aged between 18 and 24 years were considered to be overweight or obese – a significant increase from only 17 percent a decade earlier⁵. During the same period, only 37 percent of young people met the national guidelines for the daily consumption of fruit and only 16 percent met the guidelines on daily vegetable consumption⁶.

In terms of the level and patterns of physical activity in young people aged between 15 and 24 years for 2004-05, 46 percent of males and 30 percent of females met the national guidelines for physical activity to obtain a health benefit. This research also showed that a higher percentage (32 percent) of females were sedentary than males (23 percent)⁷.

While overweight, obesity and lack of sufficient physical activity has been identified as a growing problem in Australia, there also remains great concern regarding the prevalence of eating disorders in teenagers and pre-teen children. Australian studies have found that the rate of anorexia nervosa in females over 15 years of age is one in 1000⁸. In 2003, a study by the Australian Paediatric Surveillance Unit⁹ found that at one Sydney hospital the average age of anorexia nervosa sufferers had dropped from 14 years to 12 years of age. While anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders are primarily considered psychological conditions, it has long been accepted that a range of environmental and social factors may have significant influence over the development and prevalence of these conditions. Experts in this field commonly refer to the saturation of images in the media and popular culture that adversely effect the body image perceptions of young girls and women. Dieting and participation in occupations or sporting activities which require adherence to a strict diet have also been shown to be triggers placing individuals at risk for the development of an eating disorder¹⁰.

The YMCA is concerned about the lack of opportunities for young people to engage in positive and healthy activities, particularly those living in remote communities or those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The YMCA's response:

- The YMCA develops programs that encourage healthier lifestyles in young people that provide a balanced approach to exercise, knowledge about nutrition and healthy eating (**see Case Study 3: Teen Programs**).

⁵ 2004-05 National Health Survey (ABS cat. no. 4364.0) data as cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.298.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gilchrist et al. (1998); *Eating disorders revisited. I: anorexia nervosa*; The Medical Journal of Australia, 1998; 169: 438-441, Australasian Medical Publishing Company. <http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/oct19/gilchrst/gilchrst.htm#refbody2> viewed on 30/07/2008.

⁹ As cited in: Donald, P., (2003); *Anorexia affecting pre-teen children*; The World Today; ABC Radio; 11/08/2003 <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s921920.htm> viewed on 30/07/2008.

¹⁰ Gilchrist et al. (1998); *Eating disorders revisited. I: anorexia nervosa*; The Medical Journal of Australia, 1998; 169: 438-441, Australasian Medical Publishing Company. <http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/oct19/gilchrst/gilchrst.htm#refbody2> viewed on 30/07/2008.



- We also deliver integrated programs that build confidence and self-esteem in young people in an effort to combat negative perceptions of body image and growing concerns about the prevalence of eating disorders in teenagers and pre-teens.
- YMCA programs establish healthy exercise patterns and eating habits that can be maintained throughout the life-cycle.

7.3 Adults

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 fitness¹¹.

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 fruit¹².

The YMCA 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's response:

- In order to provide opportunities for working adults to engage in positive health and exercise opportunities, the YMCA provides corporate health and fitness programs (**see Case Study 4: YMCA Corporate Health Program**).
- The YMCA also delivers programs and initiatives that create a positive and supportive environment for particular groups such as pregnant or post-natal women to engage in particular activities that acknowledge their unique needs and circumstances. These are activities that not only provide an opportunity for exercise and physical recreation, but an opportunity for socialisation and peer-support.
- The YMCA also delivers intensive programs that build confidence, self-motivation, leadership as well as physical wellbeing (**see Case Study 5: YMCA Challenge Fitness Camp**).
- The YMCA delivers programs and initiatives that encourage family groups to exercise and invest in the time and opportunity to participate in positive recreational activities together (**see Case Study 6: Premier's Active Families Challenge**).

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.305-6

¹² *Ibid*, p.306.



7.4 Older adults

Older Australians now make up approximately 13 percent of the population and with life expectancy rates increasing (for non-indigenous people), males can expect to live to 83 years and females to 86 years of age. Unfortunately, much of the time in these latter years is spent living with significant disability including profound or severe core activity limitation¹³.

Research from 2000 indicates that 21 percent of older males and 14 percent of older females were sedentary and while 33 percent of males and 44 percent of females undertook some form of physical activity it was not considered to be sufficient¹⁴.

Despite a general improvement in the health of people over 65 years, coronary heart disease, cerebrovascular disease (stroke) and diabetes continue to be among the major causes of death and disability for older Australians.

The YMCA is concerned about the risk of social isolation for older Australians and the impact this has on their emotional and physical health. This is a particular concern for older Australians from a non-English speaking background.

The YMCA is also concerned about other barriers to exercise and physical recreation for older adults including lack of access to transport, a reliance on carers or residential facilities to provide adequately nutritional food and the capacity of older adults to meet the financial costs of participating in recreation programs.

The YMCA's response:

- The YMCA supports and delivers outreach programs that address the needs of sedentary older adults in a capacity-building and non-threatening environment, commencing in their own home or in their place of residential care (**see Case Study 7: YMCA My Time**).
- The YMCA also delivers programs that foster social bonds with other older people and create connectedness in local communities, while providing older adults with opportunities to participate in physical recreation (**see Case Study 8: YMCA Pryme Movers**).

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.307

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 153



7.5 People living with disability

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 disability¹⁵. 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 Syndrome¹⁶.

Some of the key issues facing people with disability that may contribute to weight gain or obesity include¹⁷:

- 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.

The YMCA is concerned about social isolation for people living with disability and the challenges faced in relation to access to transport and the availability of preventative health programs that focus on the needs of people living with disability.

The YMCA's response:

- The YMCA delivers programs which maximise participation and access to physical activity programs that cater for the particular needs of people living with **disability (see Case Study 9: YMCA RAID Program)**.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Victorian Department of Human Services (2008); Fact Sheet: Disability – Managing Overweight and Obesity, viewed 29/07/08 at

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/BHCV2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Disability_managing_overweight_and_obesity?OpenDocument



7.6 Indigenous Australians

Despite some improvements in the mortality rates of Indigenous Australians in recent years there continues to be great cause for concern in relation to persistently high rates of cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, diabetes, cancer and mental health issues. Research has shown that Indigenous Australians experience a disproportionately high degree of disease burden when compared with the broader community. While only constituting 2.5 percent of the population, Indigenous Australians experience 3.6 percent of the total disease burden¹⁸.

According to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (2004–05) rates of overweight or obesity increased with age from 37 percent (15 to 24 years) to 74 percent (55 years and over). Changes in dietary patterns over a long period of time have also been a significant contributor to increased rates of obesity and Type 2 diabetes. The rate of obesity among Indigenous youth is twice that of non-indigenous young people¹⁹.

There also exists a range of systemic social, economic and political factors that have acted, over time, to compound the health issues facing Indigenous Australians that include, but are not limited to:

- limited access to mainstream services;
- structural inequalities in broader service provision;
- lack of access to adequate sanitation and poor water quality;
- inappropriate housing;
- social isolation and exclusion;
- high rates of alcohol abuse and other illicit drug use;
- high rates of mental health issues;
- food insecurity; and
- experiences of discrimination.

The YMCA is greatly concerned about the deep structural inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians, particularly for those living in remote communities where these inequalities are impacted by growing food insecurity, housing stress, poor sanitation and lack of opportunities to engage in positive, healthy activities.

The YMCA's response:

- The YMCA supports programs that alleviate social isolation and engage young indigenous people in physical activity or sport (**see Case Study 10: YMCA CO Company Program**).
- The YMCA supports programs that enhance the level of nutritional education for indigenous families and their children.

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.81

¹⁹ Brotherhood of St. Laurence (2006); *The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Challenges facing Australian Youth*; p.2
http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL_Social_Barometer_youth_summary.pdf viewed 05/08/2008.



7.7 People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

When discussing the health issues facing migrants and refugees it is critical to draw a distinction between these two groups in terms of their:

- pre-migration experiences and health status prior to arrival;
- broader settlement experiences in Australia; and
- eligibility for and access to services.

7.7.1 Migrants

Contrary to broadly-held public perceptions about the negative health status of some migrant groups, research has shown that in general, the health of migrants is equal to, if not better than the health of Australian-born people²⁰. This is due in large part to the fact that when migrants make an active decision to migrate, this occurs at a time when they are economically and physically able to do so (in the absence of illness or disability). In addition, when accepting entrants through Australia's migration program, the Government undertakes a selection process that involves meeting particular health, education and employment skills criteria.

Following their arrival in Australia, migrants have access to a full suite of settlement services which facilitate their access to mainstream health services and the vast majority of migrants will also have close links with family and community.

Despite this, some migrants may be reluctant to participate in 'mainstream' recreation activities due to cultural or language barriers. For some older migrants, there are also growing concerns regarding levels of social isolation in the community, particularly when English is not the first or preferred language spoken.

7.7.2 Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The pre-migration experiences of refugees and asylum seekers often involve sudden and long-term dislocation from community and culture during which time there is limited access to basic health services, adequate food and safe water supplies. This is particularly the case for refugees who have spent a significant proportion of their lives in refugee camps and for those who are living on the fringes of urban areas in countries of first asylum. In addition to this, the refugee experience is often characterised by trauma, torture and other experiences which have a significant impact on long-term physical and mental health outcomes.

Services accessible to refugees and asylum seekers vary greatly depending on the manner in which people arrive in Australia and their visa status at any given time. Those who arrive through the Government's annual Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program have full access to a range of health services, including an entitlement to Medicare. Refugees who arrived by boat or air and were subsequently detained in immigration detention in Australia and offshore have had limited access to adequate health services, particularly while in detention. The impact of detention has been so detrimental for some that they now require

²⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.105



life-long treatment for physical and psychological damage caused. When released into the community, these refugees were issued only with temporary protection visas that significantly limited their access to essential settlement services, causing further social, economic and emotional disadvantage.

The deleterious impacts of temporary protection visas and immigration detention have been well-documented and researched over the past decade and while there have been some recent policy changes in relation to both these issues, the adverse physical and mental health impacts of these policies will continue to be apparent for some time. Of remaining concern is the situation facing thousands of asylum seekers in the community (including children) who do not have the right to Medicare and who, without income support, face a range of issues including poor access to health services, a high risk of homelessness and growing food insecurity.

In addition to facing language and cultural barriers, the settlement experience of many refugees and asylum seekers is acutely focused on concerns of basic daily living such as securing appropriate housing, enrolling children in school and seeking employment. Accessing physical and recreational activities is, understandably, not a high priority, particularly in the first few years post-arrival. Coupled with this, is a limited understanding of the opportunities and availability of preventative health programs and challenges that many refugees and asylum seekers face in negotiating the systems of service provision in Australia.

For many young people from a refugee or migrant background, recreation and sporting programs can be a highly positive and constructive way to engage with their local community and can aid in the settlement process including providing a positive outlet to deal with mental health issues.

YMCA Australia is concerned about the social isolation experienced by many migrants and refugees and the impacts this has on their long-term physical and emotional health.

YMCA Australia is concerned about continuing inconsistencies in Government policy which result in health care inequities and an inability for some refugees and asylum seekers to access basic health services including Medicare.

The YMCA's response

- The YMCA delivers programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for people from a migrant or refugee background to engage in culturally appropriate and positive activities that encourage health and wellbeing and foster community connectedness (**see Case Study 11: YMCA of Victoria – Carlton and Kensington**).



7.8 Socio-economically disadvantaged Australians

The relationship between levels of social and economic disadvantage and health outcomes is highly complex and involves the interface of a number of factors including educational background, income levels, housing, family structure and access to services, transport and other infrastructure.

People living in areas of the greatest social and economic disadvantage, show a higher level on nearly all indicators of health risk such as smoking, sedentary or low exercise level, low or no fruit intake and overweight and obesity²¹.

Smoking rates for those most disadvantaged (26 percent) are double that of the least disadvantaged (13 percent)²² and the proportion of people in areas of greatest disadvantage with low or no daily intake of fruit is 51 percent, compared with 40 percent in those least disadvantaged²³.

Levels of overweight and obesity are also greater (51 percent) in areas of disadvantage, than in areas of least socio-economic disadvantage (45 percent) and 78 percent of people in highly disadvantaged areas are sedentary or have low exercise levels compared with 62 percent in areas of high advantage²⁴.

In addition, young people living in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia experience significantly higher rates of obesity than those in the least disadvantaged areas²⁵.

YMCA Australia is concerned about Australians facing socio-economic disadvantage and the long-term implication they face in relation to their health and wellbeing.

The YMCA is concerned about the difficulties faced by parents experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in meeting the costs of health and recreation programs for their children, including crucial activities such as Aquatic Education programs and aquatic safety.

The YMCA's response:

- The YMCA ensures that our services and programs are accessible to everyone in the community and that no one is prevented from participating in YMCA programs and services due to an inability to pay (**See Case Study 12: YMCA Open Doors**).

²¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008); *Australia's Health 2008*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.79

²² *Ibid.*, p.139

²³ *Ibid.*, p.79

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.79

²⁵ Brotherhood of St. Laurence (2006); *The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Challenges facing Australian Youth*; http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL_Social_Barometer_youth_summary.pdf viewed 05/08/2008.



8. Successful initiatives and programs

In this section of our submission we would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the innovative programs delivered by the YMCA across all client groups.

8.1 Children

Case Study 1: YMCA Active

This innovative in-school program has been developed and run by the YMCA of Perth in partnership with local schools, sporting clubs and recreation centres. The **YMCA Active** program is aimed at increasing participation of children in physical activity by linking students with sporting opportunities through their school, local sports clubs and recreation centres. This program is free to both schools and students.

YMCA Active is a unique program in that students are provided with the opportunity to plan, create, participate and evaluate their own recreation activities in school time. This approach educates young people that there are many different ways to be active and provides a sense of ownership and commitment to the activities they choose.

YMCA Active is a 12 month program aligned with the school terms. Over the course of the school year students participate in variety of activities which culminate in an end of year YMCA Active Expo. These **activities include:**

- **Class Team Building Workshops** Students participate in activities develop to build life skills such as self confidence, socialisation and team work.
- **Leadership Camp** Four students from each school are selected by the YMCA Active Coordinator and class teachers to attend the Leadership Camp. The camp extends on the skills developed in the team building workshops and is designed to challenge students in a fun environment.
- **School Sporting Clinics** Students are given the opportunity vote on a selection of different sports clinics. The most popular are then delivered in-school and at their local recreation centre.
- **Recreation Centre Visits**
- **YMCA Active Expo** The aim of this one day event is to expose the students to a range of new sports. Students participate in 8 x 30min clinics delivered by coaching staff from local and state sporting bodies.

Since the **YMCA Active** pilot program commenced in 2001, the program has been highly successful and there are currently 41 schools engaged in the program and over 1,700 children (aged 11 and 12 years) participating in **YMCA Active**.

The need for the **YMCA Active** program was identified by the Youth Physical Activity Advisory Committee (YPAAC) which was developed by the YMCA in response to the decline in the levels of physical activity and the increasing incidence of childhood obesity. The Committee also noted that in addition to becoming more inactive there has been a decline in the number of students using sporting clubs and local recreation centres within their



community.

The key objective for the Committee is to increase the level of physical activity of students through their participation in sport and recreation, with the secondary objectives of:

- 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.

The **key objectives for YMCA Active** in 2008-09 and in to the future are to:

- provide opportunities for primary school aged children to participate in a wide variety of new physical activities;
- incorporate a health eating and nutrition educational component in the program;
- make the local sporting clubs & recreation centres more accessible to students;
- provide the opportunity for students to develop leadership skills and self confidence;
- create the opportunity for participants to network with other students of differing socio-economic and cultural backgrounds;
- provide high school students with work experience opportunities;
- improve students, teachers & parents awareness of recreation and physical activity opportunities in the local community;
- improve the health & wellbeing of WA primary school students; and
- deliver **YMCA Active** in 60 primary schools across the Perth Metropolitan Area.

YMCA Active has been recognised on numerous occasions for the program's success in engaging young people and encouraging their participation in physical activity. This success was most recently highlighted by YMCA Active winning the Department of Sport & Recreation award for Commitment to Participation in 2007.

While the **YMCA Active** program has received funding from the WA Department of Sport and Recreation, successful expansion of the program will be dependent on sustained funding in partnership with both the State and Federal Government.



Case Study 2: MEND Program

MEND – Mind Exercise Nutrition...Do it!!

MEND is a program originally developed in the UK and currently delivered in partnership with the YMCA at three Victorian sites – Macleod, Dandenong Oasis and Bendigo. The program is aimed at addressing overweight and obese children aged 7 to 13 years together with their families, by getting children and their families fitter, healthier and happier.

MEND's mission is to enable a significant, measurable and sustainable reduction in childhood overweight and obesity levels. It is an evidence-based, family oriented program which aims to prevent and treat obesity and train staff to build local capacity and skills.

MEND works in partnership with the private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver a critically needed program. By combining practical, fun learning about healthy eating, with behaviour modification techniques to boost self-confidence, and fun games that stimulate active enjoyment of physical activity, **MEND** at the YMCA empowers families to build a foundation for healthy living for life.

The program is partially funded through the Federal Government's Healthy Schools and Community Fund for a period of 18 months. The YMCA provides staff and facilities to manage and run the programs.

The **MEND** program is free to participants.

Each program has an average of 10 children and at least one member of their family participating in each program. The majority of participants learn about the program through information provided at schools.

The program has been highly successful in achieving:

- a reduction in Body Mass Index;
- a reduction in waist circumference measurements;
- an increase in the hours spent each week in moderate to intense exercise;
- a decrease in the time spent each week in sedentary activities; and
- an increase in the amount of high-nutrition foods eaten and an expansion of nutritional knowledge.

In addition to the immediate health and wellness outcomes, children and their families report experiencing greater self-confidence, have a better understanding about healthy lifestyle, made new friends and generally felt their lives were improved.



Case Study 3: Teen Programs

Brisbane

The **YMCA Teen Fitness Program** aims to educate young people aged 12 to 16 years that leading an active, healthier lifestyle now will enable them to deal with the pressures that go with being a teenager. Australian teenagers are becoming more overweight and less active and when they are unhealthy, many teenagers have less confidence and reduced coping mechanisms. The **YMCA Teen Fitness Program** also aims to provide young people with the necessary tools and knowledge to combat health related issues such as heart disease and diabetes that could emerge in adulthood if they choose an unhealthy lifestyle.

The **YMCA Teen Fitness Program** provides:

- 45 minute group exercise sessions, 3 times a week for 12 weeks;
- weight training and cardiovascular conditioning with a developing teenager's body in mind;
- exercise in a fun, controlled environment under the guidance of qualified trainers;
- information handouts that focus on teen issues and how they can develop healthy eating and exercise habits that can be maintained throughout adulthood;
- a positive and constructive outlet to deal with stressful times such as homework and exams; and
- an opportunity to develop a sense of team work, commitment and social connectedness with other young people.

The **YMCA Teen Fitness Program** has been operating for over 6 years through the Brisbane YMCA.

Victoria

In Victoria, the YMCA delivers a **Teen Gym Program**.

YMCA Teen Gym is an after school program for teenagers aged between 13 and 16 years, offering age-appropriate exercise programs for teens, fully supervised by qualified staff.

Teen Gym helps develop positive exercise habits for life, as well as helping young people to grow in confidence and self-esteem. It's fun to exercise with your mates as well!

YMCA health and fitness instructors are specifically dedicated to be 'on the floor' for members during **Teen Gym** hours - usually 7am - 9am and 3pm - 5.30pm weekdays, as well as during set hours on weekends and school holidays.



There are around 2000 **YMCA Teen Gym** members in Victoria at 42 YMCA health clubs.

The YMCA in its role of building strong people, strong families and strong communities, believes that providing fun and safe activities for teenagers in the critical after school period - when kids are often unsupervised - is of long-term benefit to a young person, their family and the wider community.

Teen Gym membership also includes:

- an initial health consultation and regular re-assessments (which parents must attend) for teenage members; and
- supervision by YMCA health and fitness instructors who have completed training in eating and excessive exercising disorders.



Case Study 4: YMCA Corporate Health Program

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. The **YMCA Corporate Health Program** is currently available for employees of the Victorian Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (DIIRD) and involves a range of structured and semi-structured activities over a 12 month period, including:

- expos focusing on a natural health, nutritional health, physical health;
- CPR courses and training;
- a series of healthy cooking classes;
- diabetes and cholesterol screening;
- various health, fitness and educational events linked to National Heart Week, National Diabetes Week and Mental Health Week;
- YMCA Challenge Fitness Camp (see below);
- Pilates classes
- Tai Chi
- relaxation techniques; and
- massage therapies.

Participation in the **YMCA Corporate Health Program** also entitles individuals to a YMCA Membership Card which provides ten complimentary visits to YMCA facilities across Victoria. Participation in the **YMCA Corporate Health Program** may be subsidised by some government departments and there are a number of program elements that can be claimed as part of some private health insurance plans.

In addition to running a Corporate Health Program, the YMCA also operates health and fitness centres in two Melbourne CBD locations servicing a number of state government departments and their employees.

Case Study 5: YMCA Challenge Fitness Camp

YMCA Challenge Fitness Camp is an outdoor group exercise training program aimed at individuals aged 25 to 45 years of age, whose goal is to have a concentrated focus on their fitness. Participants complete three sessions per week over a six week period involving a variety of exercises and activities ranging from circuit training, boxing, endurance running, obstacle courses and team based activities. **YMCA Challenge Fitness Camp** is designed to foster an inclusive, supportive and encouraging environment rather than the 'military' nature of traditional 'boot camp' programs.

In addition to the physical health and fitness benefits associated with the **YMCA Challenge Fitness Program**, participants also:



- have the opportunity to interact socially with other members of their group;
- enhance their team-building skills;
- build self-confidence;
- achieve a sense of empowerment; and
- develop a greater capacity for self-motivation.

YMCA Challenge Fitness Camps were initially launched across 12 YMCA branches in Victoria attracting over 300 participants, with another five branches now delivering the program.

In a recent evaluation of the program, participants showed significant increases across all measured fitness indicators following completion of the program. Feedback from participants also indicated that the majority:

- enjoyed the **Challenge Fitness Program**;
- felt that they had achieved their individual fitness goals;
- thought the program sessions were well planned and organised;
- found the equipment suitable for the program activities;
- enjoyed the outdoor locations of the program sessions; and
- expressed an interest in enrolling in another **Challenge Fitness Program**.

One of the key points of difference in all YMCA programs is the embedding of a developmental asset framework that underpins our mission to create strong people, strong families and strong communities. In reflecting some of these developmental assets, the majority of participants in the **YMCA Challenge Fitness Program** said:

- they felt encouraged by other participants;
- the instructors kept them motivated;
- they will continue to be active after completing the program;
- they made new friends during the program; and
- they have greater self-confidence as a result of completing the program.



Case Study 6: Premier's Active Families Challenge

The Premier's **Active Families Challenge** is part of the "Go For Your Life" initiative of the Victorian Government to promote healthy eating and increase physical activity levels. The **Active Families Challenge** aims to encourage families to undertake 30 minutes of physical activity every day for 30 days. As mentioned previously, the delivery of all YMCA programs, including our extensive health and wellness initiatives emphasises a family-focused approach where all members of the family have the opportunity to participate in a range of recreational, fitness, sporting or aquatic activities together.

As the official Community Partner, the YMCA has committed to:

- providing a 15-visit family pass to YMCA facilities for all families that register under the Challenge;
- providing a discounted YMCA Family Membership to all families who completed the challenge;
- promoting the **Active Families Challenge** in all YMCA sites across Victoria;
- highlighting the broad range of family-friendly and family-focused activities and programs that are offered by the YMCA; and
- working collaboratively with local partners to maximise community participation in the Challenge.

The Premier's **Active Families Challenge** was held from Sunday March 9 to Sunday April 20 2008 with over 8,000 families participating.



Case Study 7: My Time

My Time is an outreach health and wellness program delivered by the YMCA of Perth and is designed for the residents of retirement villages to become active and establish physical activity as regular behaviour. In particular, the **My Time** initiative focuses on providing resistance training opportunities for older adults complemented by a variety of educational seminars. Exercise, particularly resistance training has been shown to be the most effective way to actively avoid losing muscle with age. Numerous studies over the last decade or so have shown convincingly that resistance exercise training can improve muscle strength and power and improve the ability to perform the tasks of daily living.

The educational seminars provided as part of the **My Time** program include information and discussion regarding nutrition, dealing with illnesses such as cancer, living with diabetes and other general men's and women's health issues.

My Time is currently delivered in two retirement villages in the City of Rockingham and the City of Bayswater in WA. Due to limitations with space, the number participants were restricted to 20 people per program, despite having interest from over 70 people. Participants in the programs have demonstrated substantial gains in their health and wellbeing including significant improvements in balance, agility and core movement.

One of the key goals of **My Time** is to ensure its ongoing sustainability. The YMCA intends to achieve this by inviting a representative from each village to complete a Certificate III Fitness through the YMCA Perth's Registered Training Organisation. Over the course of the 12 month program this person will be further mentored by the YMCA's instructor enabling the program to continue in both retirement villages after the initial funding period.

The **My Time** program is currently funded by the WA Department of Sport and Recreation and all equipment is supplied by the YMCA. Participants pay a cost of three dollars per session and although ongoing funding is not assured at this stage, the YMCA aims to expand this program across the Perth area.



Case Study 8: Pryme Movers

Pryme Movers embraces three elements: Fitness, Fun, and Friendship. The programs:

- are specifically developed for men and women 50 years plus;
- run by qualified staff who understand the needs of older adults;
- affordably priced with membership and casual attendance options;
- include a social component with complimentary coffee and tea after the class; and
- include an opportunity for participants to broaden their social network and improve knowledge, with a variety of social events and education sessions.

During 2006-07, the YMCA celebrated 25 years of the **Pryme Movers** program with thousands of people aged 50 years and over enjoying group fitness and social activities at their local Y through the **YMCA Pryme Movers** program.

The range of **YMCA Pryme Movers** programs include:

- Strength training (accredited by the Council on the Ageing "Living Longer Living Stronger" program)
- Aqua aerobics
- Gentle stretching
- Yoga
- Walking groups
- Line dancing
- Day trips and weekend retreats

In an innovative session, some **Pryme Movers** program participants are invited to bring their grandchildren along to join in the exercises promoting healthy physical activity for young children as well as older adults.



Case Study 9: YMCA Recreational Activity for Intellectual Disability (RAID) Program

The YMCA of Canberra has developed and implemented a highly successful health and physical activity program for people living with intellectually disability and their carers.

RAID Basketball:

Running for the past 14 years, the basketball program has been very popular and is highly successful.

RAID Body Skills:

The objective of this program is to develop physical activity pathways for people with a disability. The program aims to provide participants with the opportunity to partake in a range of physical activities in a non-competitive, safe and supportive environment. Body Skills encourages and motivates people with a disability to engage in physical activity appropriate to their ability level.

This program is open to people with a moderate to severe intellectual disability and includes a 1 hour session in a gym and a 1 hour exercise session in an open hall. All sessions are conducted by qualified trainers and parents and carers are able to participate for free if they chose.

The sessions focus on:

- enhancing functional movement;
- improving cardiovascular fitness;
- engaging in resistance training; and
- having fun and socialising through games.

This program received non-ongoing funding for 1 year and while sustainability remains an issue, the program will now be able to continue due to financial input from local disability services and community groups that refer clients to the program. This support is due in large part to the success of the program and positive result achieved for participants.

During the 2007-08 year, there have been over 750 participations in the Body Skills program.

In addition to Body Skills, there is also a stretching and assisted movement class for wheelchair-bound participants.

RAID Aquatics

RAID also runs an aquatic program for people with disability and those requiring rehabilitation.

YMCA Ed Gym

This is a program designed for children under 5 years of age with special needs or who lack confidence in their gross motor skills. Classes are held in a fun and encouraging environment developed for the children's needs.

The aims of this program are to:



- expose children to the learning of a skill or movement pattern, without rushing them if they are not ready;
- encourage thought and reasoning abilities to enable children to set reasonable goal for themselves;
- create a positive self-image through successful achievement;
- reinforce language and conceptual development;
- develop social skills; and
- have fun and socialise.

The program is also structured to incorporate the child's family member, parent or carer and session sizes are limited to facilitate some one-on-one progression with the instructor.



Case Study 10: CO Company (Connections and Opportunities)

Working in partnership with the Northland Secondary College and the Northcote Aquatic and Recreation Centre in Melbourne's inner north, the YMCA aims to offer real life skills and meaningful opportunities to young Indigenous Year 12 students.

The **CO Company** program is an Indigenous training program that aims to:

- introduce young Indigenous people to career options in aquatic training;
- provide participants with skills and knowledge in aquatics;
- develop and enhance leadership skills;
- assist participants in exploring the workplace environment; and
- work with participants to develop a sense of commitment and career aspiration.

The program works with 14 Year 12 students from an Indigenous or underprivileged background giving them the opportunity to gain aquatic-based qualifications. The students are also supported and mentored towards taking advantage of employment opportunities during the summer period and are empowered to make decisions about their future, which will enhance their capacity to participate socially and economically in their local community.

While this is essentially a vocation training program, the associated benefits include:

- providing positive, physically active opportunities for participants;
- encouraging other young people from Indigenous backgrounds to participate in physical activity; and
- providing an opportunity for participants to gain general knowledge about human physiology, diet, exercise and the benefits of a healthy, active lifestyle.

The CO Company training program includes both practical and theoretical components to gain knowledge, qualifications and employment skills in:

- first aid;
- life-guarding and aquatic operations; and
- teaching of swimming and water safety.

Through the program, participants also gain an understanding of the value in undertaking a community service role as an employment option, develop leadership and mentoring skills and enhance social competencies and a sense of community identity.



The practical elements of the course are undertaken at the Northcote Aquatic and Recreation Centre with theoretical components incorporated into the school curriculum. The **CO Company** program is delivered by the highly committed team of trainers at the YMCA Institute of Education and Training (a Registered Training Organisation).

The success of the **CO Company** program is achieved through:

- the identification of local needs and local issues affecting Indigenous young people;
- enhancing social engagement and connection among diverse groups in the community;
- YMCA staff commitment to community service in mentoring and supporting young people; and
- the development of life-long skills, personal growth and employment pathways for Indigenous young people.



Case Study 11: YMCA of Victoria – Carlton and Kensington

The YMCA of Victoria provides a range of interconnected programs for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds that live on and around the public housing estates in the inner city Melbourne suburbs of Carlton and Kensington. Many of the young refugee and migrant people from the local area take part in a number of the programs and initiatives outlined below. While some of the programs are delivered through YMCA Carlton Parkville Youth Services they are also closely linked with YMCA Health and Wellness programs and incorporate both social and physical elements to meet the needs of participants.

Girls only soccer program

This program is held at the Carlton Baths Community Centre on a weekly basis assisted by staff from the YMCA Carlton Parkville Youth Services. A similar program also operated at Kensington with partnerships between the local council, local youth services and Victoria Police. This program has expanded with the girls now attending a Monday night competition. Soccer games have also been organised between the girls' team from Flemington and from Carlton which has assisted in fostering greater connection between young people from both areas.

Boys only soccer program

This program is staffed jointly by the YMCA Carlton Parkville Youth Service and volunteers from Trinity College at Melbourne University to take a group on a weekly basis to attend a soccer competition in Thomastown. The program also provides a weekly afternoon training session.

Hip Hop dance classes

These are held on a weekly basis.

Women's only bathing sessions

These sessions are held at Carlton and Kensington on Sunday and Saturday evenings respectively. The swimming program at Carlton is the larger of the programs and has been operating for over six years. Included in the program are exercise sessions in the health club and access to the spa/sauna and the outdoor pool when opened for the summer season. Additional programs which have been offered also include a Teenage Girls Basketball Programs, Adult Aquatic Education Programs and Group Fitness Programs.

While these programs are open and available to all women from the local area, the majority of women attending are from a Muslim background and find the sessions a comfortable and culturally appropriate way to exercise and make social connections.

Ramadan Program

This program is perhaps one of the most successful and popular community programs operating in the local area and is delivered by YMCA Carlton Parkville Youth Services in partnership with Victoria Police and volunteers from a local church. The Ramadan Program is essentially a community safety initiative that provides young people with a venue and organised activities during the Muslim festival of Ramadan. The program operates during the three weeks of Ramadan, Monday through to Thursday evenings from 11pm to 2am, offering structured soccer competitions and programs for young people. The program is very popular, particular with boys and young men and there can be up to 70 young people attending each night. The program has been awarded the City of Melbourne City Safety Award and has been recognised in Multicultural Resource Centre Awards.



Case Study 12: YMCA Open Doors

Australia is facing a health crisis with the rise in obesity and lifestyle related diseases. These health problems are more likely to afflict people who are facing socioeconomic disadvantage and these same people often can't afford to access the programs and services that could help them address these problems.

The Y is working on a solution aiming to help more people reclaim their right to a healthy life.

YMCA Open Doors aims to ensure no-one is denied access to our programs and services that strengthen the body, mind and spirit, particularly due to an inability to pay. **YMCA Open Doors** is an important initiative to assist people experiencing disadvantage in our community access to many life benefits offered by the YMCA.

By opening doors, the YMCA aims to narrow the gap between the health 'haves' and 'have nots'

The YMCA, with its complement of not-for-profit recreation facilities sees it has a crucial role to play in addressing Australia's obesity epidemic and other chronic health issues, with facilities in many areas where economic disadvantage is often a key contributor to poor health and wellbeing. Even in traditionally 'well-heeled' areas, disadvantage is often heightened.

In 2006-07 more than 200 individuals, many of them children, have been given financial support from **YMCA Open Doors** to take part in activities. These include aquatic education (swimming and water safety), camps, and gym and health club memberships.

Individuals can access **YMCA Open Doors** through referral by local community agencies, such as:

- Health providers (e.g. Community Health Centres or rehabilitation services)
- Welfare and support groups (e.g. the Salvation Army or Red Cross)
- Employment services (e.g. Centrelink)
- Other local community service agencies

The YMCA offers a wide range of programs and services to suit people of all ages and abilities. Some of the programs that people have accessed through **YMCA Open Doors** include:

- Camps
- Personal development programs for young people (leadership courses)
- Teen Gym
- Pryme Movers - fun, fitness and friendship for older adults.
- Gym or group fitness classes
- Aquatic education (swimming and water safety)
- Kids' programs



9. 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 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.