



March 26, 2010

Director, Office of Executive Secretariat,  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Room 116-A Whitten  
Building, Washington, DC 20250

**RE: Taskforce on Childhood Obesity**

Dear Secretaries Vilsack, Duncan, and Sebelius:

The American Horse Council (AHC) appreciates the opportunity to submit these comments concerning the Taskforce on Childhood Obesity.

The AHC is a Washington-based association that represents the horse industry before Congress and the federal regulatory agencies. The AHC includes individual members and over 160 equine organizations who represent virtually every facet of the horse industry, including horse owners, competitive associations, breeders, veterinarians, race tracks, horse shows, trainers, rodeos, farriers, breed registries, horsemen's associations, state horse councils and commercial suppliers.

**Comments**

The AHC applauds the establishment of the Taskforce on Childhood Obesity (taskforce) by President Obama to address the problem of childhood obesity. The equestrian community strongly supports the taskforce's goal of "increasing physical activity in schools and communities." It is in regard to this goal that the AHC's comments are directed.

The AHC hopes the taskforce will make outdoor recreation and competitive athletics, including equestrian activities, an integral part of its effort to increase physical activity. The AHC believes the taskforce should create a national plan that recognizes the many opportunities to reach children for whom traditional athletics may not be appealing. It is important that children have a broad array of options so they can find a physical activity that engages their attention. The AHC believes equestrian activities should be one of those options.

There are many equestrian pursuits open to youth such as eventing, jumping, and dressage, which are Olympic sports, rodeo, cutting and reining competitions as well as endurance riding, polo and recreational trail riding.

Competing on horseback is a complex and demanding physical sport. Riders must develop muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, coordination, balance, and fine motor skills. Riding can also improve posture and cardiovascular health. Though there is often the perception that the horse is doing all the work, riding certainly requires athletic skills and activity from the rider that develops muscle and burns calories. Additionally, the daily care of a horse such as mucking out stalls, stacking hay, grooming, etc promotes physical fitness also. Riding for pleasure on a regular basis has many of the same benefits as competitive riding.

Today a great many individuals who are involved in equestrian activities are young people. In fact there are many equestrian organizations specifically geared toward youth like the United States Pony Club and the National High School Rodeo Association. Additionally, most equestrian organizations have youth programs like the United States Equestrian Federation's "High School Equestrian Athlete" program or the American Quarter Horse Youth Association.

A Pennsylvania State 2006 study (Impact of Equine Activities on Youth Development) found that over 450, 000 youth participated in the American Quarter Horse Youth Association, the 4-H horse program, United States Pony Club and the National High School Rodeo Association alone.

That same Pennsylvania State study found that once children became involved in a youth horse program that 90.8% stayed involved for more than four years and 58% stayed involved for more than 8 years. It should be noted that individuals do not have to have their own horse to participate in many equestrian youth programs.

### **Taskforce Questions**

The taskforce has specifically asked "What steps can be taken to improve quality physical education and expand opportunities for physical activity during the school day, in local communities and neighborhoods, and in outdoor activities and other recreational settings?"

First, and foremost the AHC would like the taskforce to include equestrian activities in the scope of their deliberations concerning expanded opportunities for physical activity. Currently, few high schools have equestrian programs. The AHC recommends the taskforce consider all options, including grants, to encourage schools to create alternative athletics programs such as equestrian programs. The taskforce should also consider direct grants to get children involved on an individual basis by providing money for actives such as riding lessons or equestrian youth programs.

The AHC believes the taskforce should include equestrian actives in any educational materials that are designed to inform parents and educators of what options are available to get kids involved in a physical activity. The taskforce should also encourage schools to partner with equestrian organizations in their communities to get kids involved in equestrian youth programs. Many equestrian organizations are prepared to help.

## **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that the youth of America needs to become more physically active. The creation of this taskforce is an important step. The AHC believes the taskforce should consider equestrian pursuits as an opportunity to get kids excited about a healthy physical activity in an outdoor setting that they will likely embrace for many years, if not a lifetime.

The AHC appreciates this opportunity to comment on the goals of the taskforce. If you need any additional information, please contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James J. Hickey, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

James J. Hickey, Jr.  
President