

Unfit for Duty

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Washington, D.C. — It's no joke, kids. That stuff you eat at school may be a national security threat.

The Obama administration is trying to make the case that improving the quality of school meals and ridding schools of junk food is critical to combating child obesity and ensuring that young people are fit for possible military service.

"The fact that so many youngsters are not fit for military service is, indeed, a wake-up call for this country," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said at a news conference Tuesday with a group of retired military officers.

A report released by a group called Mission: Readiness says that 75 percent of all Americans ages 18 to 24 cannot join the military because they are overweight or have other disqualifying issues, such as a criminal record or inadequate education.

The report said the recession has made it easier for the military to find ample recruits. But administration officials and the retired military leaders say the obesity problem poses long-term challenges when the pool of recruits shrinks. Being overweight is by far the leading medical cause for rejecting potential recruits, the report said.

Nationwide, 42.5 percent of men and women in that age bracket are obese or overweight, according to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. State rates range from a low of 33 percent in Utah to 55 percent in Kentucky. Iowa's young men and women are just under 40 percent.

The average young man or woman nationally who is overweight or obese would need to lose 34 pounds to be at normal weight. The average young Iowan would have to lose 40 pounds, the report said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which subsidizes and oversees nutritional standards in schools, is pushing Congress for additional authority to help fight childhood obesity, and it seems, combat a national security threat.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, pending in the Senate, would allow the USDA to restrict what can be sold in school vending machines, as well as cafeterias, and subsidize improvements in the nutritional quality of meals.

Both of Iowa's senators, Tom Harkin and Chuck Grassley, sit on the Senate Agriculture Committee, which passed the bill unanimously and sent it to the full Senate for a vote later this year.

"When it comes to what our kids eat at school, we need to make the healthy choice, the easy choice," Harkin said after the committee vote. "This is an important step towards preventing the rising epidemic of childhood obesity and helping kids learn early on about the importance of healthy eating."

Iowa schools are already imposing many of the nutritional changes the legislation would impose, such as eliminating sugar and fatty foods from cafeterias. But school officials say budgets are tight and extra money is needed for food, refrigeration capacity and other equipment.

The School Nutrition Association, which represents the school officials responsible for school meals, wants more funding from Congress and welcomed the military leaders' support for the legislation.

Schools would get a financial incentive to adopt the new nutrition standards that the Senate bill requires — an additional 6 cents per meal added to their federal reimbursement rate. Current reimbursement rates, which give schools \$2.68 for each lunch they serve, have not changed since 1973, except for inflation adjustment, and schools have long complained that they are insufficient.

Iowa school officials have also said they also worry high school kids could simply leave campus to buy unhealthy snacks.

Calling obesity a national security issue adds a twist to the current debate over childhood weight, but military needs have played a role in changing government nutrition policy before.

The poor nutrition of military recruits during World War II led the government to push millers to fortify wheat flour. In 1946, the military was instrumental in passage of the original National School Lunch Act as a way of improving child nutrition.

The Institute of Medicine, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, recommended in a 2009 study that schools reduce the sodium and saturated fat in meals and offer kids more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

James Barnett, a retired Navy admiral, called obesity a “massive problem” and said there was no single solution to it. But he said nutrition standards in schools need to improve because that’s where some kids get up to 40 percent of their nutrition.

Mission: Readiness is supported by a variety of foundations and other groups, including the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts