To: Editorial and Health Writers

From: Margo G. Wootan, D.Sc., Director of Nutrition Policy

Re: State Trend: Calorie Labeling in Chain Restaurants Legislation

While many have bemoaned the rising obesity rates, a handful of states are attempting to do something about them. Several states (New York, Texas, Maine, New Hampshire and California) have taken steps to extend nutrition labeling beyond packaged foods to include foods at fast-food and other chain restaurants (locally owned, neighborhood restaurants would be exempt).

Obesity is one of the most pressing health issues of our time. It affects the majority of adults, two-thirds (65%) are either overweight or obese. And, rates are rising rapidly. Over the last twenty years, obesity rates have doubled in adults and children and tripled in teens. Obesity costs the nation \$117 billion a year in health care and related costs.

Nutrition information at restaurants is needed because Americans are eating out twice as much as in 1970. American adults and children now **eat a third of their calories at restaurants and other food service establishments**. When people eat out, they do not eat as well as when they eat at home. They eat more saturated fat and calories and less calcium, fiber, fruits and vegetables. Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat at a restaurant (770 calories) compared to at home (420 calories.)

The portion sizes and calorie counts of restaurant foods can be enormous. A white chocolate mocha and a cinnamon scone at Starbucks have about a half a day's calories (1,030 calories.) So does a large McDonald's chocolate shake (1,030 calories).

In 1990, Congress passed the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA), requiring food manufacturers to provide nutrition information on nearly all packaged foods. Restaurants were exempt. So while people have good nutrition information in supermarkets, at restaurants they can only guess. And guessing is not easy. At a typical deli, a tuna salad sandwich has 50% more calories than the roast beef with mustard. A porterhouse steak has twice the calories of the sirloin.

Two-thirds of chain restaurants do not provide any nutrition information. McDonald's, Burger King and a few other fast-food restaurants do primarily because of legal action threatened from a dozen state Attorneys General back in the mid-1980s. But even McDonald's and Burger King's nutrition pamphlets and posters are often hard to find and difficult to read. Few people are inclined to leave their place in line to squint at a hard-to-read poster or, worse yet, go to a website before leaving home.

Listing calories on menus and menu boards would provide customers with more information on available choices. Three-quarters of adults report using the food labels on packaged foods, and reading labels is associated with eating more healthful diets. About half (48%) of consumers report that the nutrition information on food labels has caused them to change their minds about buying a food product. Mandatory nutrition labeling on packaged foods also has resulted in the reformulation of existing products and the introduction of new nutritionally-improved products. Labeling could lead to restaurants competing with each other on the basis of improved nutrition, not just price.

Obesity is a complex problem with a number of contributors. While a variety of approaches are needed to address it, one promising option is for Congress, states or localities to pass laws to require fast-food and other chain restaurants to list calories, saturated plus trans fat, and sodium on printed menus and calories on menu boards (where space is limited). Other approaches are to remove soda and other junk foods from schools, limit junk-food advertising aimed at children, strengthen national and state nutrition and physical activity promotion programs and build or improve sidewalks, bike lanes and trails to support walking and biking.

Calorie labeling in fast-food and other chain restaurants has good potential to help combat obesity, given the large percentage of our calories eaten from away-from-home foods, the huge portion sizes and high calorie counts of restaurant foods, and the lack of nutrition information available at restaurants. It also is a practical, low-cost solution in these times of tight state budgets.

If you would like additional information, please contact me at 202-777-8354 or Jeff Cronin at 202-777-8370.