

Minister of Health



Ministre de la Santé

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0K9

CLERK OF THE SENATE  
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GREFFIER DU SENAT

Mr. Charles Robert  
Clerk of the Senate and Clerk of the Parliaments  
The Senate  
Centre Block, Room 185-S  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A4

Dear Mr. Robert:

Please find enclosed for tabling in the Senate, pursuant to rule 12-24(3), two copies, in both official languages, of the Government Response to the Second Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, entitled *Obesity in Canada – A Whole-of-Society Approach for a Healthier Canada* which was tabled on March 1, 2016.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jane Philpott".

The Hon. Jane Philpott, P.C., M.P.

Enclosures



Mr. Kelvin K. Ogilvie  
Chair, Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology  
The Senate of Canada  
Ottawa, ON  
K1A 0A4

Dear Mr. Ogilvie,

Pursuant to Rules 12-24(1) of the Senate of Canada, my colleague, the Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities and I are pleased to respond, on behalf of the Government, to the Second Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (Committee), entitled *Obesity in Canada – A Whole-of-Society Approach for a Healthier Canada* (Report), which was tabled in the Senate on March 1, 2016.

Our Government commends the members of the Committee, and the many witnesses who have appeared before it, for their valuable perspectives and their commitment to addressing obesity and helping Canadians achieve and maintain healthier weights.

As noted in the Report, numerous developments have taken place since the Committee last heard from witnesses for this study in June 2015, which address a number of the Committee's recommendations. To help make the healthier choice the easier choice, this Government is pursuing an ambitious agenda in healthy living, as articulated in the mandate letters of a number of Ministers and in Budget 2016.

Our Government agrees, in principle, with the Committee's recommendations. While we recognize the need for action at all levels, some issues highlighted fall under exclusive provincial and territorial jurisdiction (e.g., physician practice, childcare facilities, and school programs). We remain committed, however, to collaboration with provincial and territorial colleagues on complementary efforts.

Our Government's response, which is grouped into four themes (healthy eating; regulations, taxation and fiscal measures; physical activity/active living; and multi-sectoral approaches), demonstrates the alignment between the Committee's recommendations and existing Government policies/programs, as well as the Government's ongoing commitment to help Canadians live healthier lives.

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## **Theme 1: Healthy eating - Improving food environments to help make healthier choices easier**

As Minister of Health, my November 2015 mandate letter includes commitments to introduce restrictions on the commercial marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children, eliminate industrially-produced trans fats, reduce salt in processed foods, and improve food labelling with respect to sugars. In addition, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and I have been given a mandate to update and expand the Nutrition North program for Northern communities. The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has also been given a mandate to develop a food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food on the tables of Canadians.

To improve the food environment, and to promote and make healthier food choices easier, Health Canada will develop an approach to healthy eating. This approach will help address obesity by implementing evidence-based interventions using the various policy levers at our disposal.

The Government shares the Committee's view that healthy eating is a priority. Health Canada is concluding a review of the evidence base for its current guidance to Canadians, including how the Food Guide is being used by health professionals, educators and consumers. Review of this evidence will help to identify actions needed to support Canadians in making healthy eating choices. Health Canada will communicate publicly the results of the review of the evidence later this year.

The Committee made a number of recommendations urging the Government to make the nutritional information on food packaging easier for consumers to understand. The Government agrees with this objective and, to this end, is considering several amendments to the nutrition labelling regulations, such as making it a requirement for serving sizes on prepackaged foods to be more consistent and more accurately reflect the amounts of food typically consumed in one sitting, and adding a footnote to the bottom of the Nutrition Facts table to help consumers understand how to use the Daily Values. In addition to the proposed nutrition labelling amendments, my officials will continue to seek innovative ways to ensure Canadian have the nutritional information they need to make healthy food choices.

It is important to increase awareness about healthy eating. Health Canada implemented Eat Well, a two year (2012-2014) public awareness campaign targeted at Canadian parents and caregivers of children aged 2-12 which focused on topic areas like improving food skills and sodium reduction. Health Canada's education products and ongoing communications continue to promote simplified healthy eating messages that centre on encouraging Canadians to eat more vegetables and fruit and to build healthy meals.

Health Canada will also explore with the provinces and territories the best approach to implement the provision of nutrition information in restaurants and food service establishments.

In accordance with the Report, the Government is also taking action on Nutrition North. As noted in our respective mandate letters, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and I have a mandate to update and expand the program, in consultation with Northern communities. In addition, Budget 2016 proposed to provide \$64.5 million over five years, starting in 2016-17, and \$13.8 million per year ongoing to expand Nutrition North Canada to support all northern isolated communities.

With regards to the five recommendations made by the Auditor General about Nutrition North Canada, three were completed as of 2014-15: reviewing the requirements in contribution agreements to ensure retailers provide all information on eligible items, including current profit margins and profit margins over time; clarifying requirements for compliance reviews and ensuring the recommendations are implemented; and updating the Performance Measurement Strategy. The remaining two recommendations are currently in progress: reviewing community eligibility criteria and considering all options in implementing a cost containment strategy. In 2015-16, Nutrition North Canada completed a detailed review of all isolated northern communities to better understand the challenges they face, due to isolation, in accessing perishable foods. Remote communities in 3 territories and 7 provinces were examined, including their year-round access to approximately 30 supply centers. A common template and criteria were developed to allow for comparison of data collected, such as: community demographics, the number of grocery stores in each community, and amount of time isolated. To further the goal of transparency, all community profiles are being posted on the Nutrition North Canada program website.

## **Theme 2: Regulations, taxation and fiscal measures - Using a variety of levers to promote healthier living**

Obesity is complex and can be caused by a number of contributing factors including family history, lifestyle choices and environment. Addressing obesity, therefore, requires a multi-pronged approach involving many sectors and using a variety of tools. Governments have a number of tools that they can employ to contribute to a reduction in obesity including regulation, taxation and other fiscal measures.

Any proposed tax measures are evaluated for their efficiency in achieving a specific policy objective, their legal and financial impacts, their broader effect on the tax system, as well as their potential impact on different communities. As noted by the Committee, basic grocery items such as fruits, vegetables, milk and eggs are not taxed under the Goods and Services Tax/Harmonized Sales Tax (GST/HST). However, in general, prepared ready-to-eat items that require little or no preparation at home, such as take-out foods, soft drinks, snack foods, and other confections are taxable.

The Government acknowledges the Committee's recommendation to assess the options for the use of taxation to increase access to healthy foods and discourage overconsumption of sugar-sweetened and artificially-sweetened beverages and will continue to monitor emerging evidence on the effectiveness of such measures.

As part of the Government's efforts to simplify the tax code and better deliver help to families who need it most, Budget 2016 proposed to phase out the Children's Fitness Tax Credit. To address the high cost of raising children, including supporting physical activity, Budget 2016 proposed replacing the current complicated child benefit system with a new Canada Child Benefit. The Benefit is designed to make it easier for low- and middle-income families to afford the things that give their children a good quality of life, like a safe place to live, healthy food, and access to recreational and cultural activities. In order to assist Canadians to access these benefits, Budget 2016 also includes ongoing funding to allow the Canada Revenue Agency to extend coverage of the Community Volunteer Income Tax Program. In addition, the Canada Revenue Agency will also be renewing its focus on client service to proactively contact individuals, who are entitled to, but not receiving, tax benefits.

As noted earlier, the Government intends to introduce regulations to help make the healthy choice the easy choice by improving labelling on food packaging so that Canadians consumers can better understand nutritional information. With respect to health claims, the government has already implemented regulations regarding the use of health claims and nutrient content claims. Currently, the criteria for the use of nutrient content claims are prescribed in the *Food and Drugs Regulations*. Health Canada is planning to undertake a review of the policy and regulatory framework for health claims and nutrient content claims as part of its broader regulatory modernization plan.

### **Theme 3: Physical Activity/Active Living - Helping Canadians live healthier, active lifestyles**

Being physically active, including participating in sport, is an integral part of living healthy lives.

Given the complexity of factors which contribute to obesity, multi-sectoral partnerships are key to our efforts to address this issue. That is why the Government partners with many diverse organizations that share a common goal of promoting physical activity and active living. This includes collaboration with the provinces and territories, as well as with a broad range of organizations, including Canadian Tire JumpStart Charities, Right to Play, Go Le-Grand défi, KidSport Canada, ParticipACTION, Special Olympics Canada, and Sport for Life. Bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories promote local sport delivery to under-represented populations, such as Indigenous Peoples, persons with a disability, and women/children, to support healthier lifestyles. For instance, the Government provides funding and support to Indigenous communities for community-based and culturally relevant programs and services that promote healthy eating, physical activity and access to healthy food, build community skills and supportive environments, and encourage partnerships.

The Government agrees with the Committee in that ParticipACTION plays an important role in promoting physical activity in Canada through its many initiatives, including Active Canada 20/20, a physical activity strategy and change agenda. Since the organization's renewal in 2006-2007, the Government has provided over \$40 million to ParticipACTION to support active living initiatives and messaging. This includes core funding from Sport Canada and funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) to support healthy living projects. These projects include the *RBC Learn to Play Project*, a partnership between ParticipACTION,

the Royal Bank of Canada, and the McConnell Foundation, as well as *UPnGO with ParticipACTION*, a partnership between ParticipACTION, Public Inc., Dr. Mike Evans/Evans Health Lab, St. Michael's Hospital, the University of Toronto, and other private sector organizations. In addition, the Department of Canadian Heritage is funding ParticipACTION's *Canada 150 Playlist*, an innovative engagement initiative which will celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation by inviting all Canadians to participate in up to 150 different sport and physical activities throughout 2017. Canadians will track their participation online in as many activities as possible.

Our Government also agrees with the Committee's findings that investments in infrastructure have the potential to be a major contributor to encouraging healthy and active lifestyles for Canadians. That is why the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities and the Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities have been directed, in their respective mandate letters, to support the construction of recreational infrastructure. In addition, Budget 2016 announced an investment of \$150 million over two years and the expansion of eligibility of infrastructure programs to include sport and recreational infrastructure projects. Federal, provincial and territorial governments are also working together and with several partners, such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Canadian Urban Institute, to explore a variety of ways to further support sport and recreation infrastructure.

The New Building Canada Fund has recently been amended to include a recreation category, and the new Public Transit Infrastructure Fund allows for active transportation projects to be considered for funding between April 1, 2016, and March 31, 2018. In addition, the Government invests up to \$3 million in the Canada Games' host city for renovation or construction of sport facilities for the Games that are left as a legacy for the community's use. The Government has also proposed an investment of \$1.2 billion, over the next five years, in support of social infrastructure in Indigenous and Northern communities. The government has established a plan to identify future investments in social infrastructure which will include stakeholder consultation.

As described in the Report, public awareness campaigns and designated "health days" are important, and there are a number of them, including National Health and Fitness Day, Healthy Me Week, Sport Day in Canada, and specific chronic disease awareness campaigns. The Government recognizes the importance of these campaigns and will continue to support them.

To build upon these efforts and sustain awareness about healthy living, the Government also disseminates health promotion information throughout the year by leveraging technology, as well as the expertise and reach of public and private sector partners within and outside of the health sector. For example, PHAC is supporting *Carrot Rewards*, a national healthy living incentive platform that rewards Canadians for participating in healthy living activities and making healthy lifestyle choices that can be measured in a tangible way.

#### **Theme 4: Multi-sectoral Approaches - Increasing impact by engaging many sectors**

The Government agrees with the Committee that tackling obesity requires action at a national level. Several joint and/or complementary pan-Canadian frameworks already exist and could be leveraged to advance action across many sectors, including *Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights*; *Canadian Sport Policy*; *A Framework for Recreation in Canada 2015: Pathways to Wellbeing*; and *Active Canada 20/20*. Federal/Provincial/Territorial (F/P/T) Ministers responsible for Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation are also developing a Physical Activity Framework to help guide collaborative action in the physical activity sector.

Federally, PHAC's *Multi-sectoral Partnerships Program* provides funding to improve health outcomes by focusing on the common risk factors (unhealthy weight, physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, tobacco use) that underlie the major chronic diseases (e.g., type 2 diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease). PHAC invests approximately \$20 million/year to develop innovative approaches and partnerships to increase the impact, reach and potential for sustainability of new initiatives beyond the federal funding horizon. It also continues to seek out new and engaging avenues to modernize its data gathering and dissemination functions and maximize the impact of its activities in this area.

PHAC will continue to collaborate with corporate partners like RBC, Canadian Tire, Reebok Canada, the Canadian Football League, Sunlife Financial, The Running Room, Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment and many others, because as the Committee highlights, a whole-of-society approach is required for a healthier Canada. To date, the Government has leveraged over \$34M in private sector funds thereby optimizing resources to develop larger scale projects (up to \$10 million per project including matched private sector funds), for longer durations (up to 5 years) and with a greater reach. From an impact perspective, a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis has demonstrated that for every \$1 invested under this approach, PHAC is yielding over \$2.50 in return. On some individual initiatives, there has been an SROI return as high as 6:1.



The Government also invests, through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), an average of \$35 million each year in obesity research. CIHR funds a range of obesity and healthy body weights research from basic science to population health research, including research on obesity risk factors, early years obesity prevention, and obesity complications like diabetes. The evidence generated from this research helps to identify the most effective interventions and prevention strategies to reduce obesity in Canada.

The Canadian Sport Policy 2012, currently being implemented by F/P/T governments, aims to respond to numerous challenges including obesity, physical inactivity and related health problems by setting direction for all governments, institutions and organizations that are committed to realizing the positive impacts of sport on individuals, communities and society for the period 2012-2022. Linkages and partnerships have been identified as the most critical indicators of success for the Canadian Sport Policy 2012.

The Government contributes to international approaches and initiatives that support efforts to address obesity. For example, Canada contributes to global and regional initiatives to support progress and build on achievements stemming from the adoption of the 2011 United Nations Political Declaration on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), supported the adoption of the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of non-communicable diseases 2013-2020, supports the work of the WHO Global Coordination Mechanism (GCM) for NCD. Canada also contributed to the work of the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity.

Multi-sectoral approaches involving all segments of society are required to address complex social issues, including increasing physical activity levels among Canadians. The Government is committed to working through active engagement and partnerships with the private sector, charitable sector, organizations outside the health sector, and other levels of government to make progress and to support and sustain physical activity among Canadians that help Canadians live healthier lives.

### Conclusion

Canadians value their health. Federal, provincial and territorial governments, working with many partners, have taken important steps to encourage healthy body weights and address obesity in Canada. Together, these initiatives have established the building blocks necessary to achieve our collective goals. We recognize the long-term nature of this effort and the leadership role governments play in supporting the health of Canadians.

The Government thanks the Senate Committee for their work on this important public health issue. We trust that this response demonstrates the Government's commitment to action in addressing obesity in Canada and helping all Canadians live healthier lives.

Yours sincerely,



The Honourable Jane Philpott, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Health



The Honourable Carla Qualtrough, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities