TRANSFORMING AMERICA’S “SICK CARE SYSTEM” INTO A TRUE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM BY EMPHASIZING WELLNESS AND PREVENTION

“The path to health for our citizens, and fiscal health for our nation, is through a sharp new emphasis on wellness, disease prevention, as well as a bolstered public health system. These have been the missing pieces in our national conversation about health reform. It’s time to make them the centerpiece of that conversation. Not an asterisk. Not an afterthought. But the centerpiece of national health reform legislation.” – Senator Tom Harkin

Throughout his career, Senator Tom Harkin has sought to change the debate about our health care system to bring new focus to prevention and wellness. He has helped to convince policymakers that not only does investing in prevention save lives, but because 75 percent of health cost in America are attributable to chronic disease, much of it preventable, such efforts will also save money for generations to come.

As a result, Senator Harkin has been a tireless advocate for improving the health and wellness of all Americans. For decades he has spearheaded innovative legislation to keep individuals and families healthy – not only at the doctor’s office but also in communities, schools, and workplaces. Thanks to his efforts, Americans have better access to preventive health care services, smoke-free environments, safe places to engage in physical activity, fresh and nutritious food, and information to make healthy decisions for themselves and their families. Senator Harkin has begun to realize his vision of transforming America’s “sick care system,” focused on providing treatment after people get sick, into a “wellness system” focused on stopping illnesses and diseases before they start.
The Affordable Care Act: Establishing wellness and prevention as a national priority. The most significant health reform bill in the last 40 years, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) expanded insurance coverage for millions of Americans and made prevention and wellness a national priority. As chair of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, Senator Harkin helped to lead passage of the ACA and authored the law’s many prevention provisions. Among its many accomplishments, the ACA ensures that all Americans on Medicare and with private health insurance enjoy full coverage for proven preventive services such as immunizations and cancer screenings with no copayments or deductibles. Less than four years after the ACA’s passage, more than 105 million Americans have already received needed preventative benefits without cost sharing thanks to this landmark change authored by Senator Harkin.

Within the ACA, Senator Harkin created the $15 billion Prevention and Public Health Fund, a dedicated stream of funding for public health, wellness, and prevention initiatives. The Prevention Fund has provided unprecedented resources for states and communities to design and implement programs that prevent chronic disease and promote health through physical activity, healthy eating, tobacco cessation, and more. Senator Harkin also created the National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council, ensuring a focus on health and wellness across all federal agencies. The Prevention Fund underscores Senator Harkin’s longstanding belief that health and wellness are not achieved only in the doctor’s office but also where we live, work, and play.

Expanding Community Health Centers. As chair or ranking member of Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) for 25 years, Senator Harkin tripled funding for Community Health Centers from $496 million in 1989 to $1.5 billion in 2014. In Iowa, Senator Harkin has helped to expand the number of Community Health Centers from just two in 1989 to 14 in 2014. Building on this long legacy of expanding annual funding for Community Health Centers, Senator Harkin also successfully included an $11 billion Community Health Centers Fund in the ACA to significantly expand the number of sites that provide preventive health services and primary care in underserved communities across the nation.
Encouraging workplace wellness and requiring menu labeling. Senator Harkin successfully included additional longstanding priorities in the ACA. With the support of employers and insurers, he authored a provision allowing businesses to provide unprecedented incentives for their employees based on their participation and achievement in workplace wellness programs, and also worked to enact a provision guaranteeing reasonable break time for nursing mothers. He also authored a provision to extend nutrition labeling requirements, similar to those currently on packaged foods, to most restaurants, providing consumers with calorie information that will help to guide their eating choices.

Supporting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In his role as the senior Democrat of LHHS, Senator Harkin more than tripled annual funding for the CDC, from $2.1 billion in 1995 to $6.8 billion in 2014, allowing for historic investments in prevention and wellness programs, including those targeting smoking and tobacco use, diabetes, heart disease and stroke, as well as breast and cervical cancer. In 1991, Senator Harkin succeeded in changing the name of the Centers for Disease Control to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in order to focus greater national attention on prevention in our health care system. During a visit to CDC in 1999, he was shocked by the deteriorating condition of the agency’s aging labs and facilities. As part of CDC’s budget increase, he provided $1.8 billion over ten years for new labs, communications systems, and other facilities, allowing CDC to better carry out its mission as a world-class agency responsible for protecting the nation’s health. The CDC’s Global Communication center in Atlanta is named in honor of Senator Harkin.

Leadership in reducing smoking. Beginning in 1994, Senator Harkin provided funding to the CDC to expand its research into the impact of tobacco smoking by cataloguing and researching the content of smoking products on the market. The evidence developed by this research was critical to the success of the state lawsuits in the 1990s that culminated in the landmark Master Settlement Agreement of 1997. This agreement launched the Legacy Foundation, which funded anti-smoking campaigns for more than a decade.

Improving consumer access to vitamins. In 1994, together with Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT), he passed the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act to improve consumers’ access to vitamins and other dietary supplements. In 2005, the two Senators ensured that suspected adverse events resulting from the use of these products were properly reported to the FDA, while also continuing to ensure consumer access to these products.

Combatting the obesity epidemic. Senator Harkin has been a trailblazer in the effort to combat obesity, sounding the alarm about childhood obesity and other diet-related diseases long before the public health risks became widely recognized. He led the effort that required school districts participating in the National Student Lunch program to establish School Wellness policies, requiring almost every school in America to have a plan to promote sound nutrition and physical activity. These plans have helped schools improve the health of their students, and were a precursor to more ambitious efforts in the 2010 child nutrition bill, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. As a senior member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Senator Harkin played a leading role in authoring and enacting the bill, which included the most significant
reforms of child nutrition programs in decades. Most notably, the law included a long-sought provision requiring national nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools, including in vending machines, school snack bars, and a la carte cafeteria lines.

**Restricting trans fats and sodium.** Recognizing that 90 percent of Americans eat more sodium than is recommended for a healthy diet, and that each year trans fats cause thousands of premature fatal heart attacks, Senator Harkin led the effort to eliminate trans fats and limit sodium in the food supply through FDA regulation.

**Providing FDA authority to regulate tobacco products.** In 1998, Senator Harkin introduced the first comprehensive, bipartisan bill to give the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authority to regulate tobacco, a precursor to the Harkin-cosponsored *Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act*. Enacted in 2009, the legislation gave the FDA authority to regulate the manufacturing, distribution, and marketing of tobacco products. It has helped to bring about the lowest rate of smoking since the 1960s. More recently, he has also been a leader in fighting insidious marketing practices by electronic cigarette manufacturers targeting children. Over the course of Senator Harkin’s career in Congress, the percentage of adults who smoke in the U.S. has fallen from 35 percent to 18 percent.

**Supporting alternative care.** Senator Harkin has long believed that evidence-based complementary and alternative medicine should play a larger role in health care. In 1991, he authored legislation establishing the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to build the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of integrative health care products and services. From 1992 to 2013, he secured funding of more than $1.7 billion to study the effectiveness of products and services Americans are increasingly seeking outside their doctors’ offices.

**Promoting community wellness.** Throughout his career, Senator Harkin has sought creative ways to promote wellness in schools, workplaces, and communities. He created partnerships with the national YMCA to promote healthy eating and physical activity, and to utilize the YMCA’s network of local affiliates to implement promising community interventions that reduce chronic disease and improve people’s health. Since 2004, he has funded prevention programs at CDC using local YMCAs as partners. These programs include Pioneering Healthier Communities; Action Communities for Health, Innovation, and EnVironmental changE (ACHIEVE); Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH); Community Transformation Grants; the Diabetes Prevention Program; and Partnerships to Improve Community Health.

In 2005, he created the Harkin Wellness Grants program, which promoted healthier lifestyles in communities across Iowa by helping dozens of local governments, community organizations, and non-profits to develop creative approaches to encouraging community wellness. This program served as a precursor to CDC’s Partnerships to Improve Community Health (PICH) grant program, which Senator Harkin also created. PICH invests $50 million annually in community-based efforts to make it easier for people to make healthy choices and take charge of their health.

Across many decades and through a plethora of legislative actions as well as public and private initiatives, Senator Harkin has jumpstarted America’s transformation into a genuine wellness society, one that emphasizes prevention and public health. The aim is to give Americans the tools they need to take charge of their health, while dramatically reducing the impact of health care expenditures on personal, corporate, and governmental budgets.