



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
January 5, 2007

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## **FIRST INTENSIVE PROGRAM FOR OBESE PRE-SCHOOLERS BEGINS IN WESTCHESTER**

### *New Program Will Put Tots on Treadmills and More Fresh Fruit in Their Homes...and More*

(Tarrytown, NY)... Adults are not the only ones dealing with the battle of the bulge. A shocking number – 1,000 of the 4,000 pre-schoolers served by the Women's, Infant and Children (WIC) Program at Sound Shore Medical Center of Westchester – are obese. Now these children, ages 2 – 5, will begin "FIT-WIC," a six-week intensive childhood obesity intervention program to help fight an epidemic of obesity among low-income children. The first session was held today at Sound Shore Medical Center in New Rochelle.

Hudson Health Plan, which provides information on free and low-cost health insurance for children on-site at WIC, is actively supporting FIT-WIC. "Community programs like FIT-WIC will play an important part in finding ways to make the environment more conducive to good health," said Janet Sullivan, MD, Chief Medical Officer of Hudson Health Plan, at the FIT-WIC opening ceremonies. "Obesity cannot be seen as just a medical problem; it is a social problem. It should be easier for a child to eat an apple and play ball than it is to watch TV and drink a soda."

WIC is a federally funded program supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide supplemental foods and nutrition education for qualified pregnant, breastfeeding and post-partum women, infants and children up to the age of five. Hudson Health Plan is a managed care organization that provides free and low-cost health insurance to children and adults in Westchester and the Hudson Valley.

### **Low-income children prone to obesity**

The children participating in FIT-WIC are considered obese because their Body Mass Index (BMI) places them in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of children of their age and height. For example, the median BMI for a three-year-old boy is 16; the three-year-old boys in this program have a BMI of 18.2 or higher, according to Ms. Rosario. “These children are at high risk of early onset of diabetes and high blood pressure,” she explains, adding that low-income children are particularly prone to obesity. “Their mothers have to rely on cheap ways of feeding children, such as fast food or rice and meat. Fruits and vegetables are expensive.” As part of this and all WIC programs, parents will receive vouchers to purchase fresh food and vegetables in supermarkets and farmers markets.

All children will be weighed at the beginning and end of FIT-WIC. They and a parent will attend 30- to 40-minute sessions three days a week for six weeks. The children will engage in active play, games, and dancing, using pint-sized equipment such as treadmills and basketball hoops. WIC used a \$21,000 New York State Department of Health Healthy Lifestyle grant to purchase the equipment as well as tee-shirts and backpacks filled with items to spur physical activity at home. Parents will receive separate nutrition instruction while children engage in special activities designed to teach them about making healthier food choices. “If we do it in a fun way, children are more likely to remember they should drink water, not soda or so much juice, and other healthy food choices,” explains Ms. Rosario.

To keep the kids moving once the program ends, WIC has turned to organizations such as Hudson Health Plan for support so that WIC can cover the cost of membership for the children in the New Rochelle YMCA. “Most of these children spend their free time watching TV, particularly in the winter time,” notes Ms. Rosario. “We deeply appreciate Hudson Health Plan’s help so that we can cover the cost of YMCA membership for some of

these children." FIT-WIC is seeking other sponsors to pay \$35 for an annual child membership at the New Rochelle YMCA, which is offering FIT-WIC a reduced rate of \$35, almost half the cost of an ordinary membership of \$60. Those interested in sponsorship can call Ms. Rosario at 914-637-1295.

To obtain more information about free and low-cost health insurance, the public can call Hudson Health Plan's toll-free, multi-lingual customer service number, **1-800-339-4557**.

### **About Hudson Health Plan**

Founded in the mid-1980s by a coalition of community health centers, Hudson Health Plan's Mission Statement is "to promote and provide access to excellent health services for *all* people." The Tarrytown-based not-for-profit organization provides comprehensive medical and dental coverage to more than 60,000 members in New York's Hudson Valley. Hudson Health Plan has been driving health care innovation by developing technology to support clinical quality initiatives and streamline the enrollment process for Medicaid Managed Care, Child Health Plus, and Family Health Plus. It earned the highest ratings in overall satisfaction among health plan members enrolled in Medicaid managed care in the Hudson Valley region in 2005 and 2006.

Hudson Health Plan is the winner of the 2006 *Poughkeepsie Journal* Diversity in the Workplace Award; the 2005 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Corporate Award for Diversity from the YWCA of White Plains and Central Westchester; the 2005 Advancements in Health Care Award from *Hudson Valley Life* and *Hudson Valley Parent*; and the 2003 Community Leadership Award from The New York Health Plan Association.

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