September 2, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) as it refines the framework and objectives for Healthy People 2020. Like DHHS, we are committed to the goal of promoting a healthier America.

Workplace Flexibility 2010 (WF2010) is a multi-year research, outreach, and consensus-building enterprise focused on developing a national policy on workplace flexibility that fits the needs of employers and employees. WF2010 is the lead policy component of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s National Initiative on Workplace Flexibility. The goal of the initiative is to make workplace flexibility a standard feature of the American workplace through both voluntary employer efforts and thoughtful public policy.

From the beginning of our project, we have been interested in understanding the interaction between work-family conflict and health outcomes. As DHHS explained in a 2004 RFA establishing the “Work, Family, and Health Network,” “[d]emographic, sociological, technological, and economic changes occurring in the U.S. since the 1950s have radically altered family life, the nature of work, and the conditions of employment. The contemporary situation presents new challenges for men and women attempting to balance the ever more complex demands of family and work and for employers attempting to adjust to changes in the economy, the nature of work, and the workforce. All of these changes can act independently or in concert to positively or negatively affect the health of the workers themselves or the health of their family members.”

Workplace flexibility is a key response to this cultural shift and offers a myriad of potential benefits, including many directly related to individual health and well-being. We define the term workplace flexibility to include flexible work arrangements, time off (in short term, episodic and extended increments), and

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2 NICHD RFA-HD-04-017 (Released September 24, 2004).
job maintenance and reentry. While the research base remains ripe for deeper exploration, a growing body of evidence suggests that workplace flexibility may be a powerful tool for meeting both the overarching goals and focus-area objectives of the Healthy People 2020 initiative. Specifically:

- **Workplace flexibility may help achieve the goal of eliminating preventable disease, disability, injury and premature death** – A flexible workplace can have a direct, lasting, and positive effect on the health of employees. Studies indicate that long work hours and inflexible work are linked to numerous adverse outcomes, including: high blood pressure, increased body mass index, coronary disease, heightened risk of breast cancer among women, increased fatigue, metabolic disorders, occupational accidents and injuries, and depression. Moreover, the high level of stress suffered by individuals in high stress and high strain jobs has been associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, fibromyalgia, musculoskeletal disorders, chronic hypertension, depression, and expedited biological aging. Inflexible work arrangements and accompanying stress may also lead to unhealthy and risky behaviors including increased levels of drinking and smoking, and greater physical inactivity.

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3 For a more complete definition of each one of these three components, go to http://www.law.georgetown.edu/workplaceflexibility2010/definition/index.cfm.

4 Specifically, the expert panel we convened in 2005 suggested further research is needed to more clearly explicate causal chains, directionality, and the role of mediators in alleviating negative health effects. See WF2010’s 2006 APHA presentation.


Research suggests flexibility in the workplace enables employees to better manage stress and to engage in healthy lifestyle habits. Additionally, two recent studies analyzing workplaces that have launched flexible work arrangement initiatives suggest that employees who have the flexibility they need enjoy better sleep, are more likely to visit a doctor when sick, exercise more frequently, experience gains in energy, report fewer absences for illness and are less likely to say that health problems affect their job performance.

Finally, workers without adequate paid short term time off are frequently compelled to attend work, even when sick. Presenteeism – the problem of American workers going to work even when sick – encourages the spread of infectious diseases and creates serious health risks for society. By contrast, employees who enjoy flexibility in their work, including innovative strategies for managing sick leave, are more likely to stay home from work when sick and to seek the medical care they need when ill, thereby helping prevent the spread of infectious disease.

- **Workplace flexibility is also a viable tool for achieving health equity, eliminating disparities and improving health of all groups –** Workplace flexibility likely plays a role in the widening health gap between rich and poor, as well as racial and ethnic disparities in health. Low-income workers, many of whom are racial and ethnic minorities, have less ability to take time from work to go to doctors’ appointments, care for a sick child, or to take sick leave when ill. The limited control that low income workers often have over their work schedules also can lead to unhealthy personal routines such as a lack of exercise and over-reliance on energy-dense convenience and commercially-prepared foods like that

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obtained from fast food establishments and which are linked to serious health disorders. Estimates from several sources suggest that only 25% of workers have regular access to flexible work arrangements, most of whom are likely to be well-paid, highly educated professionals. Expanding access to flexible work arrangements and time off options to a wider spectrum of workers can serve to address many of the underlying causes of existing health disparities.

- **Workplace flexibility provides a concrete strategy for creating social and physical environments that promote good health for all** – Worksite health promotion has been a core Healthy People objective for the past 30 years. Unfortunately, in the absence of workplace flexibility, worksite health promotion is simply a goal without a means. Workers need schedules that permit them to take time to care for their health – to work out at a nearby gym, attend an on-site weight loss program, or participate in other worksite wellness programs. As workplace flexibility becomes the norm, social expectations will adjust so that workers are encouraged – and therefore more willing – to engage in worksite health promotion and improve their health and well-being.

- **Workplace flexibility is valuable for promoting healthy development and healthy behaviors across every stage of life** – A significant majority of a person’s life is spent in the workforce. Promoting workplace flexibility is one of the best ways to advance the cause of healthy development across every stage of life. Workers with sufficient access to workplace flexibility are simply better equipped to take care of themselves as well as dependent others, including infants, children, adolescents, and aging parents.

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Indeed, the potential effect of workplace flexibility for the family of workers is too often ignored. When parents lack workplace flexibility, children are more likely to miss needed doctors’ appointments and do not receive adequate early care.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, children of workers with inflexible scheduling are more likely to have unhealthy diets, higher rates of depression and child behavioral problems, and lower rates of self-esteem.\textsuperscript{19} These children are also more likely to be sent to school or child care when sick, thereby increasing the spread of contagious illnesses.\textsuperscript{20} Studies indicate that when parents have access to workplace flexibility, there is an increased likelihood that they will be involved in their children’s care, resulting in numerous health benefits for children, including more rapid recovery.\textsuperscript{21} The positive health effects of workplace flexibility will also likely be felt by the aging parents to whom an increasing number of workers are providing intensive assistance. Indeed, workplace flexibility will likely play a central role in resolving care-giving problems associated with our aging society.

Lastly, workplace flexibility regarding when and how workers exit the labor force presents another avenue for encouraging healthy development and behaviors across the lifespan, particularly in later life. Phased retirement plans, for example, allow older workers who might otherwise be forced to either work full-time or drop out of the workforce completely to continue in the workforce on a more reasonable schedule.\textsuperscript{22} A recent survey entitled, “Attitudes of Individuals 50 and Older Toward Phased Retirement,” found that the reasons employees who are at least 66 years old work during “retirement” were the “desire to stay mentally active (72%) and the desire to remain productive and useful (71%).”\textsuperscript{23} And research indicates that making phased retirement plans available to workers can generate significant health benefits for those workers.\textsuperscript{24}

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\textsuperscript{21} Heymann, J. (2000).
\textsuperscript{24} Gallo W., Bradley E., & Kasl S. (1999). “Health Effects of Job Loss Among Older Workers: Findings from the Health and Retirement Survey.” Association for Health Services Research. For additional information on the interplay between workplace flexibility and an aging workforce, see the Center on Aging & Work at Boston College at http://agingandwork.bc.edu/template_index.
We have highlighted just a few of the many ways in which workplace flexibility can contribute to lasting and important health benefits for all Americans. Times have changed – both the way of doing business in a global economy and the needs of 21st century America families. But, overall, as a society we have done a remarkably poor job of encouraging our workplaces to account for the reality that most workers today will have multiple demands on their time – demands that can undercut their own health and the health of their families.

WF2010 hopes that you will consider promoting workplace flexibility as a valuable tool toward achieving Healthy People 2020’s goals and objectives. Thank you for your consideration and please let us know if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

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25 By spring 2009, Workplace Flexibility 2010 will have developed a comprehensive platform of specific policy ideas on workplace flexibility (including ways DHHS can promote the issue) with input from a range of stakeholders and members of our bipartisan National Advisory Commission on Workplace Flexibility. For more information on this process, see http://www.law.georgetown.edu/workplaceflexibility2010/consensus.cfm.