



# MISSION: READINESS

## MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

## Too Fat to Fight: A Brief on Georgia

### Retired Military Leaders Want Congress to Finish the Job of Helping Georgia Get Unhealthy Food Out of Its Schools

**MISSION: READINESS** is the organization of over 200 retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders who support policies and investments that will help young Americans succeed in school and later in life and will enable more young adults to join the military if they choose to do so.

**Summary:** The retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders of MISSION: READINESS are warning Congress that approximately one in four 17- to 24-year-olds in the United States is too fat to serve in the military. Obesity rates among children and young adults have increased so dramatically that they threaten not only the overall health of America, but also the future strength of our military. One survey found that only Mississippi had a higher proportion of obese 10- to 17-year-olds than Georgia. Last December, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. In response, the United States Department of Agriculture proposed a set of new regulations aimed at improving the nutrition in school breakfasts and lunches. These will help kids replace bad eating habits with healthy ones that can last a lifetime. But to finish the job, Congress needs to ensure our schools get needed equipment for better food preparation and updated training for their food service workers.

According to an analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), during the past decade, the number of states with 40 percent or more young adults

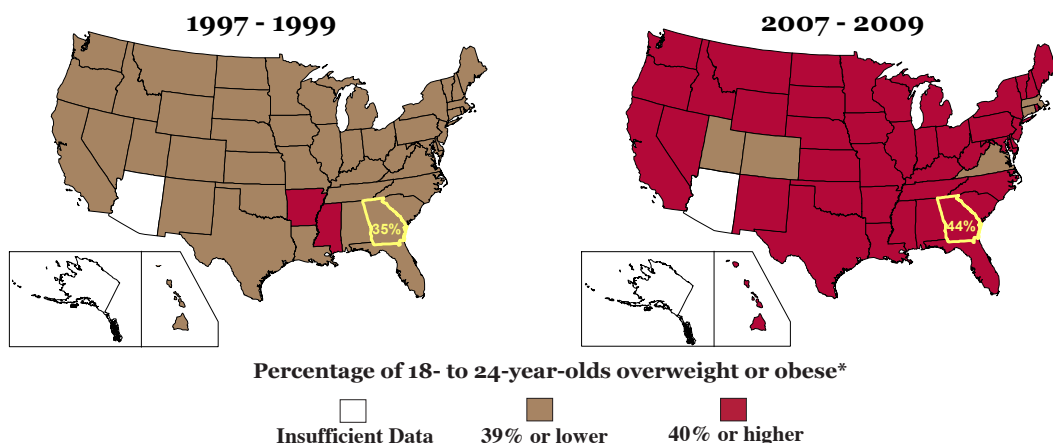
considered overweight or obese has risen from two states to 43. In Georgia, the overweight or obese rate jumped from 35 percent to 44 percent – an over 25 percent increase in just ten years.

Today, more than 200 retired generals and admirals are calling on Congress to keep the momentum of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act going by improving the quality of school meals and doing the following:

**First, upgrade equipment.** Some cafeterias only have the capacity to re-heat pre-packaged food, while others continue to rely on deep fryers. To convince kids that healthier food can be delicious, many school cafeterias urgently need new kitchen equipment like refrigerators, freezers, ovens and salad bars to serve fresher, more nutritious food.

**Second, train cafeteria workers to prepare healthier meals.** In a recent survey, school nutrition directors reported that recruiting skilled cafeteria workers is their number one challenge. Food service workers need new training to prepare safe and appealing meals using more fresh ingredients.

**Over a ten-year period, the number of states with 40 percent or more of their young adults who were overweight or obese went from 2 to 43.**



\*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. If states were missing data for one or more years, data from 1996, 2000, 2005 or 2006 were used to generate a pooled average for three years in order to have large enough samples. Only states with enough data in both periods were included. Alaska did not have data for either period and Arizona did not have data for the later period.



Credit: U.S. Army Sgt. Daniel Lucas, 2010

## America’s Military Leaders are Sounding the Alarm Again

Military leaders have spoken out before to make sure America’s youth had proper nutrition for a healthy start in life. During World War II, the military discovered that at least 40 percent of rejected recruits were turned away for reasons related to poor nutrition.<sup>1</sup> The National School Lunch Program, established in 1946 with legislation named after Senator Richard B. Russell, helped improve the health and well-being of our nation by making sure children across America had access to healthier meals at school.

**A new threat: one quarter of Americans are too overweight to join.** Surveys done for the Army’s Accessions Command, which carries the responsibility for recruiting and the initial training of new Army recruits, and for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that about one in four young Americans is too heavy to join the military.<sup>2</sup>

**The CDC’s estimates for who is overweight or obese are alarming:** The military makes allowances for young people who have extra muscle, not fat, or those who are close to the desired weight and can lose some of their excess weight in boot camp. So some potential recruits may still qualify who fall into the overweight category using the simple weight to height ratio – the Body Mass Index (BMI) – routinely used in national and state surveys. Using those more typical cutoffs, the CDC’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System found that **44 percent of young adults 18 to 24 years old in Georgia were either overweight or obese.**<sup>3</sup> That equals over 300,000 young adults. To be within the healthy weight range, a BMI of under 25, those young people would have to lose over ten million total pounds.<sup>4</sup> That is the equivalent of almost 90 Abrams tanks.<sup>5</sup>

By any measure—the military’s or various CDC surveys—it is beyond question that too many young Georgians are overweight or obese. [See the United States maps of CDC data.] Within just a ten-year period ending in 2009, the number of states reporting that 40 percent or more of their

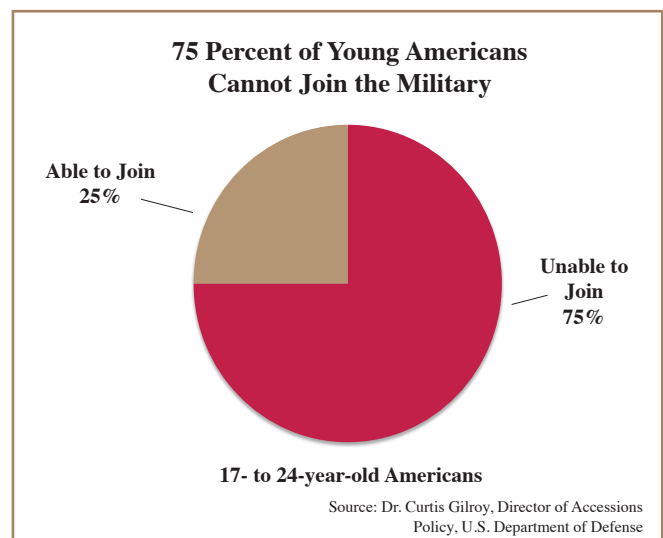
young adults were overweight or obese went from just two states to 43; and **Georgia went from 35 percent of their young adults overweight or obese to 44 percent in that ten-year period.**<sup>6</sup>

American childhood obesity rates have accelerated faster than adult obesity rates. Over the past 30 years, while adult rates of obesity have doubled, childhood obesity rates have tripled.<sup>7</sup> The *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* reported that “almost one-third of American children – nearly 23 million children and teens – are either overweight or obese.”<sup>8</sup> Another health survey of over 90,000 American children done in 2007 found that **only Mississippi had a higher proportion of obese 10- to 17-year-olds than Georgia.**<sup>9</sup> Largely because of this epidemic of obesity, **one team of scientists has warned that today’s children may be the first generation of Americans to live shorter lives than their parents.**<sup>10</sup>

**Seventy-five percent of Americans 17 to 24 years old are unable to join the military for one or more reasons.**<sup>11</sup> A quarter of young Americans are currently not graduating from high school on time, and nearly one in four of those who do graduate and try to join are not able to score well enough on the military’s entrance exam.<sup>12</sup> Another ten percent of Americans cannot join the military because of their criminal records.<sup>13</sup> Some have other disqualifiers keeping them out and some have multiple overlapping reasons why they cannot join.

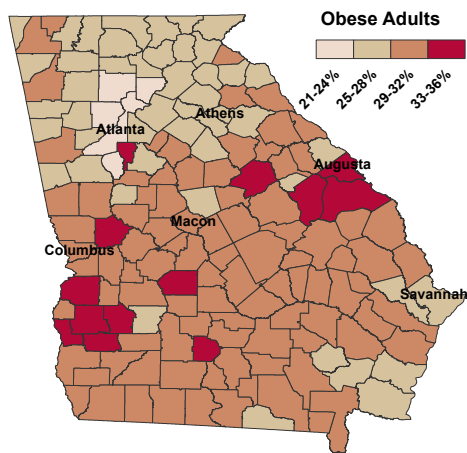
When weight problems are combined with educational deficits, criminal records and other disqualifiers such as asthma or drug abuse, 75 percent of Americans 17 to 24 years old are unable to join the military for one or more reasons.<sup>14</sup> The military will need to have more fit young men and women if it is going to keep finding enough recruits with the excellent qualifications needed for a modern military.

The severe recession has temporarily reduced the challenges the nation’s 15,000 military recruiters face in meeting their quotas for signing up qualified individuals.<sup>15</sup> But recruiters remember the recent past when they could not sign up enough young men and women to meet the nation’s military needs.<sup>16</sup>





## Percent Obese Adults in Georgia, 2008



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Clifford Stanley has warned Congress about the need to avoid a “boom or bust” recruiting cycle, and retired Air Force Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip has warned, “a failing economy is no formula for a strong military, and these longer-term eligibility problems are not going away.”<sup>17</sup>

**The military’s ongoing problems with weight:** Unfortunately, the impact of weight problems on the military does not stop with those turned away. Every year, the military discharges over 1,200 first-term enlistees before their contracts are up because of weight problems. The military must then recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$50,000 for each man or woman, thus spending more than \$60 million a year.<sup>18</sup> That figure pales in comparison, however, to the over \$1 billion cost of treating the obesity-related problems of military personnel and their families under the military’s health care system, TRICARE, or the additional cost of treating obesity-related problems directly under the Veterans Administration health care system.<sup>19</sup>

## Schools Can Play an Important Role in Reversing the Epidemic

In order to address obesity, it is important to start early. The journal *Health Affairs* reports that “80 percent of children who were overweight at ages 10-15 were obese at age 25.”<sup>20</sup> What children eat and drink at school is critically important because many children get up to half of their daily calories from school meals.<sup>21</sup>

**America has had a big problem with what kids were eating in school.** One study showed vending machines were available in “21 percent of elementary schools, 62 percent of middle schools and 86 percent of high schools,” and most of those machines served unhealthy snacks.<sup>22</sup> Too often, school meals are not much better:

- New, healthier standards are on the way, but the United States Department of Agriculture reported that 90 percent of schools serve meals not meeting America’s current nutritional standards.<sup>23</sup>

- Fried potatoes or chips make up 22 percent of all the vegetables children eat at school.<sup>24</sup>
- Whole grains make up just five percent of breads, rolls or bagels on school menus.<sup>25</sup>
- The most popular entrée item offered daily in high school lunches is pizza.<sup>26</sup>

## Crucial Next Steps for Congress

If America’s cafeterias are going to switch to healthier meals that include more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat and nonfat milk, schools will need additional resources. The historic Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act cannot play its crucial role in reversing the childhood epidemic of obesity unless Congress acts now to:

**Upgrade equipment:** New refrigerators will be needed to store healthier foods. Freezers can keep freshly-prepared food safer longer, reducing the need to rely on canned or pre-processed foods. More ovens are needed to replace deep fryers, and salad bars will help children begin to make wiser food choices.

**Train cafeteria workers:** Without improved training, bringing more fresh foods into the cafeteria could lead to spoilage and increased risks to children. Staff will also need more coaching in preparing meals with fresh ingredients that are more appetizing. As in any restaurant, properly trained staff will be essential for producing healthier meals that kids can enjoy.

Encouraging kids to eat healthier meals will backfire if the meals served are not fresh, well-prepared and appetizing. The goal is not just to hand out healthier meals, but to help children adopt healthier eating habits for life. Fresher, more appetizing meals are crucial if we are to convince children that they – and the rest of their family – can cut back on their consumption of unhealthy foods and sugary beverages and switch to healthier foods. As one elementary student asked at a school providing healthier foods, “Can I take my snack home for my brother? He’s never tasted a pear.”<sup>27</sup>



Credit: Flickr Creative Commons, 2011



## Conclusion

After World War II, military leaders sounded the alarm about the health of America's children. The President and Congress heeded that warning by enacting the National School Lunch Program. Now, retired military leaders have again sounded the alarm, and Congress responded by passing the new Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. This year, however, Congress needs to finish the job by making sure schools have the right equipment and worker training needed to serve our children healthier and more appealing food.

The United States military stands ready to protect the American people, but if we do not help ensure that future generations grow up to be healthy and fit, that will become increasingly difficult. The health of our children and our national security are both at risk. Decisive action by Congress is still needed.

## Endnotes

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- 2 Center of Accessions Research (CAR), United States Army Accessions Command, Fort Knox, KY, data provided by Lt. Colonel Gregory Lamm, Chief, Marketing and Research Analysis Division, February 25, 2010; Cawley, J. & Maclean, J.C. (2010). *Unfit for service: The implications of rising obesity for US Military recruitment*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. The Accession Command's estimate that 27 percent of 17- to 24-year-old Americans are too heavy to join is based in part on a survey done for them by the Lewin Group in 2005. The National Bureau on Economic Research (NBER) study is an analysis of data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) study. The NBER analysis looks at eligibility rates for males and females based on BMI and body fat and exclusion criteria for the different services. Based on the NBER analysis, we conclude that approximately 23 percent of adults eligible by age would not be able to join the Army because of excess body fat. Taking both studies into account, the NBER analysis of NHANES data and the Accessions Command's analysis, we conclude that approximately one quarter of young Americans would be too heavy to join the military if they chose to do so.
- 3 National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion. (2010). Prevalence and trends data – Overweight and obesity. *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved on March 29, 2011 from <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/BRFSS/list.asp?cat=OB&yr=2009&qkey=4409&state=US>
- 4 This is data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, (BRFSS), a phone survey of over 350,000 individuals each year. This calculation of the excess pounds 18- to 24-year-old American women and men would have had to lose to be of healthy weight (below a BMI of 25) in each state and nationally was calculated by the CDC's epidemiologist who processes BRFSS data, Liping Pan, and was provided in a table to MISSION: READINESS in a personal communication, March 18, 2010. That data was for 2008, but for Georgia, the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds who were overweight or obese did not change for 2009. National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion. (2009). Prevalence and trends data – Overweight and obesity. *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved on April 1, 2010 from <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/BRFSS/list.asp?cat=OB&yr=2008&qkey=4409&state=US>
- 5 USGlobalSecurity.org. (2005). That data was for 2008 but for Georgia the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds who were overweight or obese did not change for 2009. The tank estimate is from: *M1 Abrams main battle tank*. Retrieved on March 29, 2011 from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/m1-specs.htm> One tank equals 60 tons, or 120,000 lbs. 10.5 million pounds that must be lost equals almost 90 tanks.
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- 9 National Center for Children's Health. (2007). *National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)*, 2007. Portland, OR: Oregon Health & Science University. Retrieved on March 29, 2011 from <http://www.nschdata.org/ViewDocument.aspx?item=307>. A total of 91,642 surveys were completed nationally for children between the ages of 0-17 years. Between 1,725-1,932 surveys were collected per state – all states exceeded the goal of 1,700 completed surveys.
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**“80 percent of children who were overweight at ages 10-15 were obese at age 25.”**

**Source: Frieden, Dietz, & Collins, 2010, Health Affairs**

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- 16 See for example: Associated Press. (2005). *Army's recruiting lowest 'n' years*. Retrieved on March 29, 2011 from <http://www.military.com/NewsContent/0,13319,77951,00.html>
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MISSION: READINESS is the non-partisan, nonprofit, national security organization of more than 200 retired generals and admirals. The military leaders of MISSION: READINESS call on all policymakers to ensure America's security and prosperity by supporting interventions proven to help America's youth succeed academically, stay physically fit, and abide by the law.

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