

**Obesity and COVID-19: The Impact in Philadelphia**  
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Currently, 30.9% of adults in the Keystone State are living with obesity.<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia struggles with obesity at an even higher rate. Approximately 67.9% of adults in the city and approximately 41% of youth aged 6-17 are overweight or obese. Additionally, nearly 70% of youth in North Philadelphia, the majority of whom are black or Hispanic, are overweight or obese, which is nearly double the rate for youth in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

African American Pennsylvanians are disproportionately impacted by obesity at approximately 39.5% , the highest percentage of any racial or ethnic group in the state.<sup>3</sup> Minorities experience higher rates of chronic diseases, including obesity, because they are more likely to lack adequate health insurance, access to healthy foods, and safe and convenient places for physical activity.

Research has shown a linear relation between body mass index and COVID-19 risk. A recent study by the CDC estimated that approximately 78% of people who have been hospitalized, needed a ventilator or died from COVID-19 have been overweight or obese.<sup>4</sup> It is now more important than ever to ensure that our communities have access to the full continuum of care to diagnose and treat obesity.

Evidence-based obesity care – which may include a combination of behavioral therapy, pharmacotherapy, and bariatric surgery - has the potential to reduce the risk of how severely COVID-19 presents or lingers in persons and improve overall health. Still, many do not have access to treatment. Obesity coverage is usually not part of a standard benefit package, and employers must “opt-in” to coverage. Medicare’s coverage rules for obesity predate recognition of obesity as a chronic disease and Medicaid in Pennsylvania currently does not cover access to pharmacotherapy. Congress is currently considering legislation that would update these rules to establish coverage in Part D and a bill in the state legislature would allow pharmacotherapy in Medicaid. As our elected officials look to address the dual challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and broader health inequities, treating and reducing obesity must be a focus.

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<sup>1</sup> US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult obesity prevalence maps. Overweight and obesity [Internet]. 2019 Oct 29 [cited 2020 Aug 18]. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/prevalence-maps.html>

<sup>2</sup> US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Community Health [Internet]. 2013 Oct 25 [cited 2021 March 11]. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dch/programs/communitiesputtingpreventionintowork/communities/profiles/both-pa-philadelphia.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. COVID-19 Science Update released: March 5, 2021 Edition 79. Accessed 2021 March 10. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/library/covid19/scienceupdates.html>