



MEDIA RELEASE

STATE OF TENNESSEE
BUREAU OF TENNCARE

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TENNCARE TACKLING OBESITY THROUGH WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAM WITH WEIGHT WATCHERS

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - The State of Tennessee is tackling the problem of obesity by partnering with Weight Watchers to provide weight loss services to TennCare enrollees who are substantially overweight, TennCare officials announced today.

The TennCare Bureau will pay a discounted rate for enrollees who meet certain obesity criteria to participate in Weight Watchers' nationally recognized weight loss program. The new program is available to TennCare enrollees who have a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more, or who have a referral from their physician for a serious weight-related condition. BMI is a widely recognized calculation based on an individual's height and weight; a score of 30 or higher is considered obese.

The new program is a cost-effective alternative to the rapidly growing rate of obesity and the medical conditions that result from obesity.

"Obesity-related illnesses are deadly, but they are also preventable," said TennCare Director, J.D. Hickey. "The average cost of this 12-week program for a single enrollee is about the same as a month's supply of a single branded drug, so this program represents a minimal investment with significant benefits," Hickey said. "Partnering with the Weight Watchers program affords us the opportunity to improve enrollee's health while reducing obesity-related medical costs."

Nearly 2 out of 3 Americans are overweight and obese, which represents a 50 percent increase from a decade ago. The obesity problem is especially apparent in Tennessee which ranks 5th in the rate of adult obesity in the country at 25 percent. Obesity is a common risk factor for three leading killers: cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Research indicates that sustained modest weight loss will reduce an overweight person's lifetime medical costs by up to \$5,300 by lowering costs for treatment of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and high cholesterol.

A 2003 study reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* demonstrated that dieters are more successful in losing weight and maintaining their weight loss when they follow the Weight Watchers program than when they attempt to lose weight on their own. A more recent review in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* acknowledged Weight Watchers as the only commercial weight loss program whose efficacy has been demonstrated in a large, multi-state, randomized, controlled trial.

"We appreciate that the State of Tennessee recognizes the growing problem of obesity and believe this partnership presents a unique opportunity to improve the health of Tennesseans and reduce obesity-related costs in the future," said Carolyn Kalil, vice president of Weight Watchers of Middle and East Tennessee.

(more)

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Beginning in January, TennCare enrollees 10 years of age or older whose BMI is 30 or greater, or who have a doctor's referral may enroll in a 12 week Weight Watchers program. For safety reasons participation in the program is not open to pregnant women or individuals with diagnosed eating disorders. The program will be offered statewide, with Weight Watchers-sponsored meetings occurring in every county at approximately 500 meeting locations across the state.

Individuals who attend 10 weekly meetings in the 12 week period, achieve their targeted weight loss for the period, and complete an evaluation at the end of the program will be eligible for an additional 12-week program. TennCare, through its managed care organizations, will cover the cost of the program; however, adult enrollees will be responsible for making a \$1 co-payment at each weekly meeting.

TennCare is Tennessee's expanded Medicaid program, providing health insurance coverage to 1.2 million Tennesseans including 640,000 children. For more information about the TennCare program or to access this news release online, visit <http://www.tn.gov/tenncare/>

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