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MEDIA ADVISORY

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A news conference is scheduled for Thursday, April 1 at 2:30 p.m. at the Oklahoma City-County Health Department, 921 NE 23rd Street in Oklahoma City.

Mayor Mick Cornett, County Commission Chairman Ray Vaughn and others will discuss the new community health initiative – **Wellness Now**.

Statement of Oklahoma City-County Health Department Director Gary Cox

For the past several decades the health of our community in Oklahoma City and County has steadily gotten worse – to the point that children in our community are in danger of living shorter lives – suffering early death from cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other illnesses.

Today, the Oklahoma City-County Health Department and our partners are gathering to announce a new community health initiative that will coordinate resources and enlist help from every sector of our county to find ways of bringing ourselves back to good health.

Our community health initiative – **Wellness Now** – represents a major, coordinated push to bring our resources together to provide a framework for improving our health and helping people change their behaviors. Instead of concentrating primarily on treating illness, we are shifting our focus toward promoting wellness and preventing health problems before they occur.

Mayor Mick Cornett and Oklahoma County Commission Chairman Ray Vaughn have graciously agreed to co-chair a steering committee that will bring together partners from

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businesses, organizations, agencies, the schools and the faith based community, as well as individuals. **Wellness Now** will draw on the strengths of all of these partners in a combined force to improve our health status in the short term, and to work for long term gains.

According to the recently released county health rankings, Oklahoma County is 30th out of 77 counties in health outcomes. To put that ranking in a larger context, Oklahoma's overall health status is ranked 49th in the nation and the United States is ranked 37th in the world.

Oklahoma City-County Health Department epidemiologists have analyzed a number of health factors in our county down to the zip code level – so we now have a much clearer picture of health improvements that are needed on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis. We've been looking at the many factors that influence health including availability of transportation and access to healthy food. And we'll be using this information - combined with good evidence from other communities - to guide us toward health improvement approaches that can make a real difference.

From the evidence we've seen, obesity and tobacco use contribute the most to our poor health status – and this initiative will concentrate our energies in these two areas. Since 1990, the prevalence of obesity in Oklahoma has increased from 11.6 percent to 30.9 percent – and obesity is a primary contributor to high rates of most of the diseases that lead to premature death. By 2018 – in a scant eight years – obesity in Oklahoma is projected to increase to 56 percent. That puts more than half of our population at risk of serious disease.

According to United Health Foundation projections, the cost to our economy from obesity related problems will amount to more than five billion dollars in the next ten years – that's five billion dollars in Oklahoma every year – one billion in Oklahoma County.

This is a crisis that we cannot afford to underestimate. We have some of the finest physicians, hospitals and health research institutions in the world in Oklahoma County – but it's clear that factors beyond clinical care must be addressed. Improving our health will require a fundamental shift in our approach at a multitude of levels.

We are blessed here with many fine organizations, agencies and individuals who have been working hard for years to make a difference. You will see quite a few of them here today. We are building on their work, and they are joining with us now to make this coordinated push for better health.

Our partners will be providing you with some of the details of our initiative today and much more will be forthcoming as our **Wellness Now** steering committee develops specific plans and addresses priorities.

I can tell you that we will be concentrating our efforts on schools and childhood obesity, workplace wellness programs for adults and programs that target specific neighborhoods to promote healthy behaviors at home and in the community.

No one group or organization can change our health status. We have a crisis here and all of us – everyone in our community needs to step up and get involved.

According to an analysis in The New England Journal of Medicine, children today may become the first generation to live shorter lives than their parents. We don't have to let that happen. But changing that outcome is going to require a firm commitment from all of us.

This is a community challenge – and it's going to take a focused effort by the entire community to make a difference.

Wellness Now partners scheduled to speak at the news conference on April 1, 2010 include:

- **Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett**
- **Oklahoma County Commission Chair Ray Vaughn**
- **Oklahoma City Public Schools Board Chair Angela Monson**
- **Oklahoma State Health Commissioner Dr. Terry Cline**
- **University of Oklahoma College of Public Health, Dr. Gary Raskob, Dean**
- **Faith Based Initiatives, David Lee**
- **Chesapeake Energy, Martha Burger, Senior Vice President**
- **OKC Chamber of Commerce, Roy Williams, President and CEO**
- **Capitol Chamber of Commerce, John Hasley, Chairman of the Board**