UTHSCSA’s Amelie Ramirez Named Co-Chair of Mayor’s Fitness Council

SAN ANTONIO (May 24, 2010)—In the wake of the city’s $15.6 million federal grant to fight childhood obesity, San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro has named Amelie G. Ramirez, DrPH, director of the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, a co-chair of his new Mayor’s Fitness Council, which will develop ways to spur improved community nutrition and activity.

The council, which met for the first time this week, also is co-chaired by Wane McGarity, a former Dallas Cowboy and current H-E-B health promoter, and Tony Canty of Labatt Food Service and the YMCA of Greater San Antonio.

The council will develop and implement initiatives in these five main areas:

- Media and community outreach/education;
- Corporate and organizational wellness;
- Healthy school;
- Nutrition and fresh food; and
- Fitness, recreation and active transportation.

“We have the exciting task of developing a variety of innovative ways to improve nutrition and physical activity across San Antonio,” said Dr. Ramirez of the UT Health Science Center, who also heads a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded Latino childhood obesity research network called Salud America! “I’m really looking forward to seeing the kind of changes we can make to reverse the obesity epidemic, especially among our children and underserved populations.”

The Mayor’s Fitness Council was funded by a $100,000 grant from the Texas Department of State Health Services and the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness.

The council will meet monthly.

Council members come from an array of different sectors, including chef Andrew Weissman, health columnist Claudia Zapata, personal trainer BayBay McClinton, Peter Wald of USAA, Eric Cooper of the San Antonio Food Bank, George Hernandez of the
University Health System, Roberto Trevino of the Social and Health Research Center, representatives from Judson and Edgewood independent school districts and more.

Others with UT Health Science Center ties include Ruth Berggren, MD, associate professor of medicine, Dan Hale, MD, professor of pediatrics, and Peggy Visio, MS, adjunct assistant professor of dental hygiene.

Members will be divided into subcommittees to work in the five main areas.

Some specific planned initiatives under those main areas to be developed by the council include: a media campaign, Web site, “train the trainer” institute for P.E. teachers and other training programs in July, a Mayor’s Fitness Challenge for the public and students starting in August, an initiative to bring healthier options to school cafeterias and vending machines, community garden and farmer’s market initiatives, bringing healthier food retailers to underserved areas, incentivizing adoption of healthier restaurant menus, fitness summit, and street, parks and built environment improvements, according to city documents.

Such changes are needed to address the city’s high rates of overweight and obesity.

Latinos, a large part of San Antonio’s population, suffer disproportionately from obesity and are at greater risk of related health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. A recent national study showed that 38 percent of Mexican-American children ages 2-19 are overweight or obese, compared with 31.9 percent of all children.

Obesity also is known to increase health care costs, workplace absenteeism and more.

“The problem of obesity is indeed profound nationally and in San Antonio,” Dr. Ramirez said. “The city’s new grant funding and our council can reduce obesity’s health and economic costs and improve the health of residents, especially the underserved.”

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The Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) investigates the causes and solutions to the unequal impact of cancer and chronic disease among Latinos in San Antonio, South Texas and the nation. The IHPR, founded in 2006, is based at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio with a satellite office in Harlingen, Texas. The IHPR uses evidence-guided research, training and community outreach to improve the health of those at a disadvantage due to race/ethnicity or social determinants. Visit the IHPR online at http://ihpr.uthscsa.edu.