

TESTIMONY OF RASHARD MENDENHALL
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Rashard Mendenhall. I recently completed my second season as a running back with the Pittsburgh Steelers. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on an issue of great importance to the National Football League, and to me personally – the epidemic of childhood obesity.

Launched in 2007, the NFL PLAY 60 campaign is a national youth health and fitness campaign focused on combating childhood obesity by encouraging kids to be active for at least 60 minutes a day. Sixty minutes is the physical activity recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

NFL PLAY 60 was designed to build on the league's long-standing commitment to health and fitness. The NFL decided to focus on the issue of childhood obesity because it recognized not only the public health crisis facing our nation, but also the NFL's unique place in our culture and its ability to influence attitudes and behaviors – especially among young fans.

NFL PLAY 60 promotes the importance and fun of getting 60 minutes of physical activity per day. Kids are encouraged to find their own ways to get active – whether it's taking advantage of the local playground, playing four-square in the school yard, or establishing a walking club with friends. PLAY 60 presents organized sports – including youth football – as a great way to get active, but certainly not the only way. The NFL does not necessarily ask kids to play football for 60 minutes a day. We simply ask kids to play for 60 minutes.

Since the inception of PLAY 60 in 2007, the NFL has committed more than \$200 million in resources to youth health and fitness through media time for public service announcements, programming, and grants. Last year alone, more than 700 events were hosted by all 32 NFL teams who implement PLAY 60 in their local markets. NFL PLAY 60 is also supported year round by many of the NFL's most prominent players, including Drew Brees, Eli Manning, DeMarcus Ware, Jason Witten and my teammates, Hines Ward and Troy Polamalu.

In January, the NFL hosted the Pro Bowl in South Florida. The NFL asked all of its All Star players to fan out across the community on a single day to complete youth health and wellness oriented projects. The NFL PLAY 60 Pro Bowl Community Blitz involved NFL Pro Bowl players building playgrounds, hosting youth football clinics, and leading healthy cooking demonstrations. This day is just one example of a year-round effort – during the football season and in the off-season – to promote youth health and activity.

I am committed to supporting the NFL's goal of combating childhood obesity. I see this epidemic around the country, in our schools, and in my community. As a professional athlete, I feel I have a responsibility to be involved in this issue, which is why I am active in NFL PLAY 60 through the Fuel Up to PLAY 60 program.

In January, I attended an event for the Fuel Up to PLAY 60 program at the Central Park East Middle School in Manhattan. Fuel Up is a joint effort between the NFL, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Dairy Council designed to create healthier environments in schools.

Fuel Up currently has a presence in 60,000 schools across the country. This program empowers youth to help make their schools healthier and to develop life-long healthy eating and physical activity habits. Agriculture Secretary Vilsack, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher, and many others were in attendance.

I had a chance to interact with more than 100 kids in the 6th through 8th grades. Along with the others in attendance, I spoke to them about healthy living and staying active. I described for the kids what I did outside of football to maintain my health – dancing, roller skating, and playing basketball. We also discussed all of the sports – in addition to football – that I participated in as a kid and how important that was to me.

I also had the opportunity to participate in the PLAY 60 activity stations with the kids. We worked on football activities like learning how to correctly throw a football, but also a number of running, climbing and agility drills.

The facts surrounding childhood obesity are startling. Nearly one in three children and teens in the U.S. are obese or overweight. That is more than 23 million youth. In the last two decades, the rate of overweight children has doubled.

We know that youth who are overweight or obese are more likely to have health risk factors associated to cardiovascular disease such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type II diabetes. In contrast, the benefits of good health translate to the classroom where studies show that fit students are less likely to have disciplinary problems. Healthy students also perform better on standardized tests.

It is possible that these facts, while shocking, should not come as such a surprise when we consider that more than 60% of children ages 9–13 do not participate in any organized physical activity during non-school hours. The number of idle children is increasingly significant when schools around the country find it challenging to offer physical education classes. Sadly, 50% of the schools do not provide physical education in grades 1–5; 75% do not provide classes for grades 6–8.

Recently, the NFL has been honored to participate with First Lady Michelle Obama on her Let's Move Campaign. Just this fall, representatives of the NFL were also proud to join the President in filming a public service announcement supporting PLAY 60 and President Obama's community service initiative. It is exciting to see the White House add their commitment and passion to this issue.

I am hopeful that the NFL's efforts complement the work of the White House and the Congress in addressing this public health crisis. I have attached to my testimony descriptions of some of the programs the NFL supports in its PLAY 60 initiative.

Mr. Chairman, I commend you on holding this hearing and focusing Congressional attention on this vital issue of public health. I look forward to working with you and members of the committee and look forward to answering your questions.

Key NFL PLAY 60 programs are outlined below:

NFL PLAY 60 Challenge is the NFL PLAY 60 in-school curriculum, created in partnership with the American Heart Association. The NFL PLAY 60 Challenge teaches educators and children to integrate health and fitness into daily classroom lessons. The NFL PLAY 60 Challenge provides 50 short activities that teachers can weave in throughout the school day and kids can implement at home.

NFL Take a Player to School allows kids to bring the ultimate ‘show-and-tell’ to their classrooms each year. Lucky students in 34 cities nationwide win the chance to arrive at school with an NFL player and to design the Ultimate NFL Gym Class with that player. Together, the NFL player and the winning student lead classmates in fitness activities and talk about the importance of good health and smart food choices.

Mini ReCharge! is a youth fitness program produced by the NFL and Action for Healthy Kids. Packed with action and loaded with fun, Mini ReCharge! kits are full of activities designed to get kids on their feet and energized. The kits are distributed nationwide to schools, after-school programs, and local community groups.

Fuel Up to Play 60 is an NFL and National Dairy Council program that supports student-fueled efforts to bring about healthy changes within their schools. This program shows student teams how they can responsibly and effectively engage key school and community leaders to create healthy school environments.

Keep Gym In School is the NFL Network's PLAY 60 program, working with Verizon Fios, Comcast and Cox Cable to adopt and deliver high quality, daily physical education opportunities to schools in four school districts across the U.S. Keep Gym In School provides support as needed to upgrade facilities, hire certified Physical Education instructors, and supply equipment for Physical Education classes. In addition, schools nationwide can compete for ten \$1,000 grants to support physical education in their school.

The NFL PLAY 60 Super Bowl Contest allows young fans to explain how staying active helps them live better lives. One lucky child who submits a short essay about the role of health and fitness in his/her life will win the ultimate prize – a chance to run on field with the game ball and hand it to the referee in front of millions right before kickoff at Super Bowl.

NFL Flag Football, NFL Punt, Pass and Kick, and the NFL Girls Flag Football Leadership Program encourage all young fans to be active and fit. In addition to these year-round programs, special **NFL PLAY 60 Youth Football Festivals** during major events such as the Draft, Kickoff, Super Bowl and Pro Bowl allow thousands of children to get active alongside NFL superstars. Kids in underserved areas of NFL markets also get the chance to engage in PLAY 60 activities through new and refurbished fields, courtesy of the **NFL Grassroots field grant program**.

Hometown Huddle is the NFL's annual league-wide day of service held in October in partnership with United Way. All 32 teams – including players, coaches, owners and staff – host

a service project in their local community. Since 2007, these projects have reflected the NFL's commitment to getting kids active and healthy; teams use this day to build playgrounds, refurbish gymnasiums and teach kids about the importance of healthy living.

All 32 NFL teams are heavily engaged in PLAY 60. Players make school visits to talk about the importance of health, host youth fitness events, construct youth fitness zones, and film public service announcements. Whatever forms the community outreach may take, the message is the same: NFL teams and their players know the importance of youth health and fitness.