



**Testimony of Jonathan Kirch**  
**American Heart Association/American Stroke Association**  
**before the Senate Local Government Committee**  
**Harrisburg, PA**  
**October 17, 2017**

Chairman Wagner, Chairman Blake, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak regarding the Philadelphia sweetened beverage tax. I am Jonathan Kirch, Government Relations Director with the American Heart Association; unfortunately, our board President Dr. Paul Mather—a heart transplant cardiologist—was not able to clear his schedule to be here today.

Sugary drinks are the single leading source of added sugars in the American diet and are associated with an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases. The American Heart Association recommends that children over the age of two have no more than one 8-ounce sugary drink a week, yet children today are consuming as much as ten times that amount. Tragically, children in low-income families consume two-and-a-half times more than their peers in higher-income neighborhoods, and this is due to aggressive marketing by the beverage industry aimed at these market segments.

The Philadelphia sweetened beverage tax accomplishes two laudable public policy objectives: (1) improving the health of the community; and (2) funding community-supported programs, including desperately needed high-quality Pre-K, parks, recreational centers, and community schools. The elected representatives of the City of Philadelphia should be able to rightfully enact their own innovative solutions to community health, education, and infrastructure based on local needs.

The Philadelphia sweetened beverage tax will reduce diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and other chronic illnesses—health problems that are particularly pronounced in Philadelphia’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities. Researchers at Harvard University have projected that over a ten-year period, the tax in Philadelphia will reduce consumption of sugary drinks enough to prevent nearly 20,000 cases of type 2 diabetes and reduce the incidence of heart disease, stroke, and obesity. As a result, the researchers forecast more than \$76 million in health care cost savings over that span. Add to that the improved quality of life that would accompany the savings, and the case is strong for the tax from a health perspective.

The policy provides opportunities for Philadelphia children to benefit from high quality Pre-K education, which improves their ability to live prosperous, healthy lives and achieve their full potential. In addition, the Pre-K program allows their parents and other family caretakers to go to work, and created over 200 jobs, both of which contribute to the Commonwealth's economy.

It is vital for children and adults alike to have increased opportunities for physical activity and access to safe drinking water in the community, which improvements to city parks and recreational centers provide. The American Heart Association was especially happy to see the Mayor highlight items like improved basketball courts and functional water fountains as part of the Rebuild program. These changes can alter the daily lives of Philadelphians and, ultimately, improve their health. Likewise, getting children into quality Pre-K programs provides opportunities for physical activity, nutrition, and foundational learning which addresses overall social determinants of health. The result is improvement of the long-term health of not only the children in those Pre-K seats but also the City as a whole. Unfortunately, a significant amount of the revenue from the tax is tied up because of the beverage industry's lawsuit and these programs are currently unable to scale up to their full potential until the dispute is resolved with certainty and finality in the courts.

The media coverage of the Philadelphia beverage tax has been focused on unsubstantiated claims about job losses. The tax is funding Pre-K seats that have not only created more jobs in early childhood education, but are setting kids up for a better education and to be more employable when they grow up. More jobs will be added in construction as soon as the City is able to move forward with the Rebuild plans. Stories of beverage industry job losses have grabbed the headlines centering the blame on the sweetened beverage tax. However, according to interviews with beverage company executives, industry job losses are being driven by shifts in customer taste preferences toward healthier beverages that are upending the companies' traditional business model. Despite what the beverage industry wants you to believe, research and real-world experiences show that sugary drink taxes do not cause job losses; in fact, these taxes will result in a healthier workforce and actually create new jobs—and that is healthier for us and healthier for our economy.

Though not formally before this committee today, we are disheartened by legislation being offered by Senator Mario Scavallo to take local control away from Pennsylvania communities on the issue of sugary drink taxes. Statewide policies that remove local control have far reaching consequences, tying the hands of local governments to respond to their citizens' needs and concerns. As our elected officials, we ask that you not stand in the way of new chances for prosperity and a brighter future for the Commonwealth's largest city, and those municipalities that may want to make decisions to improve their communities in the future.

One of the primary philosophical tenets of modern conservatism would be that the level of government closest and most nearest to the people is best suited to determine the policy solutions to their issues and address them locally—with local resources and accountability to local voters. We ask that you respect the innovative problem solving that Philadelphia's elected lawmakers undertook to craft a local solution to a local need.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views. I would welcome any questions the committee may have.