

# THE CUNY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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**Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York**

## **Testimony in Support of Mandatory Warning Label for Added Sugar on Sugary Beverages**

**Nicholas Freudenberg**

April 13, 2015. I am here to testify in support of Bill 2320A, an act to amend the New York State agriculture and markets law, in relation to the labeling of sugar-sweetened beverages with warnings. I am a Distinguished Professor of Public Health at City University of New York School of Public Health and Hunter College and Faculty Director of the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College. I offer four reasons for supporting labeling of sugar-sweetened beverages with warnings on the health effects of added sugars.

First, as you have heard from others, the scientific evidence that added sugars contribute to the nation's most serious health problems -- obesity, diabetes, other diet-related diseases, and dental decay-- is robust and overwhelming. In addition, dietary profiles of the American and New York State populations show clearly that sugar-sweetened beverages like Coca Cola, Pepsi, Snapple and sweetened energy drinks are the most important source of added sugar in our diets. Unlike some other topics in nutrition and health where there is debate, scientists not funded by the food industry are generally in strong agreement that limiting added sugar in the American diet would yield significant health and economic benefits and no unintended adverse effects.

Second, while most parents and children know that fresh fruits and vegetables, for example, are healthier than Coke or Pepsi, they do not know the specific disease burden associated with added sugar. Warning labels would ensure that all New Yorkers have ready access to this potentially life-saving information. These labels would also provide school and community-based health educators with a tool to further educate children and families about nutrition, diet and health, just as calorie posting in chain restaurants has done. In tobacco control, we learned that children can be effective educators of their parents and warning labels provide simple language for children to appeal to their parents to quit smoking. Warnings on added sugar could similarly empower children to bring health messages to their families. The more opportunities we create to provide individuals and communities with the knowledge they need to protect their health the better able we'll be to contest the health-damaging messages that beverage companies promote. Each year these companies spend about a billion dollars a year to encourage consumers to

drink their products. Added sugar warning labels are one modest way to challenge these messages and therefore to make healthy choices easier choices.

Third, some of you have heard the arguments from Big Soda and their lobbyists that warning labels are not the perfect solution to the health problems their products cause. I urge you to follow the advice of the French philosopher Voltaire, who warned, "Don't let the *perfect* be *the enemy of the good*." It's true, by themselves warning labels will not reverse our nation's reliance on unhealthy processed foods or end the obesity epidemic. But we have learned from our many decades effort to reduce tobacco use that each incremental policy and educational effort produces a cumulative and synergistic effect.

In the last several decades, our nation has cut smoking rates in half. As a result, says the CDC, our nation has prevented 8 million premature deaths and extended the average lifespan by almost 20 years for the people who did not take up smoking because of prevention campaigns. By approving 2320A now, you can contribute to the policy shift that will enable similar savings in lives and dollars from added sugar. We will of course need to do more to limit the harmful effects of added sugar, but the proposed labeling requirement is an important and easy step in the right direction.

Finally, and most urgently, I appeal to you not only as legislators but also as parents, grandparents and caring citizens. In the next two or five or ten years, most states, counties, cities and, yes, eventually the federal government, will take the policy steps needed to avoid the human suffering and economic costs that premature deaths and preventable illnesses attributed to added sugars now impose on our society. And as our children and grandchildren look back on those successes, they will ask, as they have done about tobacco, "What took them so long?" , "Why were elected officials so slow to act on such clear evidence?" , and "How could they have allowed special interests to make higher profits for soda companies a more important public goal than health?"

By voting to approve 2320A now, you will show you took action when you could. By voting to approve 2320A now, you will make New York State a leader, rather than a follower, living up its history as a public health innovator. By voting to approve 2320A now, you will be telling the citizens of this state that you care more about the well-being of its children and families than the profit margins of a few giant global corporations. I thank you in advance for doing the right thing now.

### **Resources on Sugary Beverages and Assembly Bill A2320A**

Read [text](#) of proposed bill 2320A.

Find resources on [sugar-sweetened beverages](#), [sugar drink marketing](#) and the proposed federal [Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Tax Act of 2015](#), or the SWEET Act, introduced by Congresswomen Rosa DeLauro, at Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Read [Press Release](#) from April 8, 2015, Nation's Leading Public Health Researchers, Scientists Endorse California, New York Sugar Drink Warning Label Bills

Read Nick Freudenberg's commentary [Time to Talk on Added Sugar Policy](#)