

ISSUE FORUM: **HEALTH/HOSPITALS****Fighting Obesity by Breaking Unhealthy Attitudes and Behaviors**

BY CITY COUNCIL MEMBER JOEL RIVERA

AMERICA IS FACING AN unprecedented health crisis, with epidemic obesity rates generating a wide range of otherwise preventable illnesses. Unhealthy dietary habits and physical inactivity contribute to nearly 300,000 deaths in the U.S. each year.

This situation is even worse in New York City, where the Bronx leads other boroughs in the prevalence of heart disease, diabetes and stroke, ailments that can all be traced back to the unhealthy consequences of obesity. A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control found that Hispanic children in New York City have the highest rate of obesity.

Scientists point out that many Hispanics carry genes that make us predisposed to being overweight. I won't disagree with the scientists, but I do believe one major factor contributing to this epidemic is a significant lack of nutritional knowledge.

As the chair of the City Council's Health Committee, and in response to this growing health emergency, I have

set a number of priorities in order to properly direct Health Committee resources to address these issues. Needless to say, looking for creative ways to educate New Yorkers and mitigate the obesity epidemic is my number one priority.

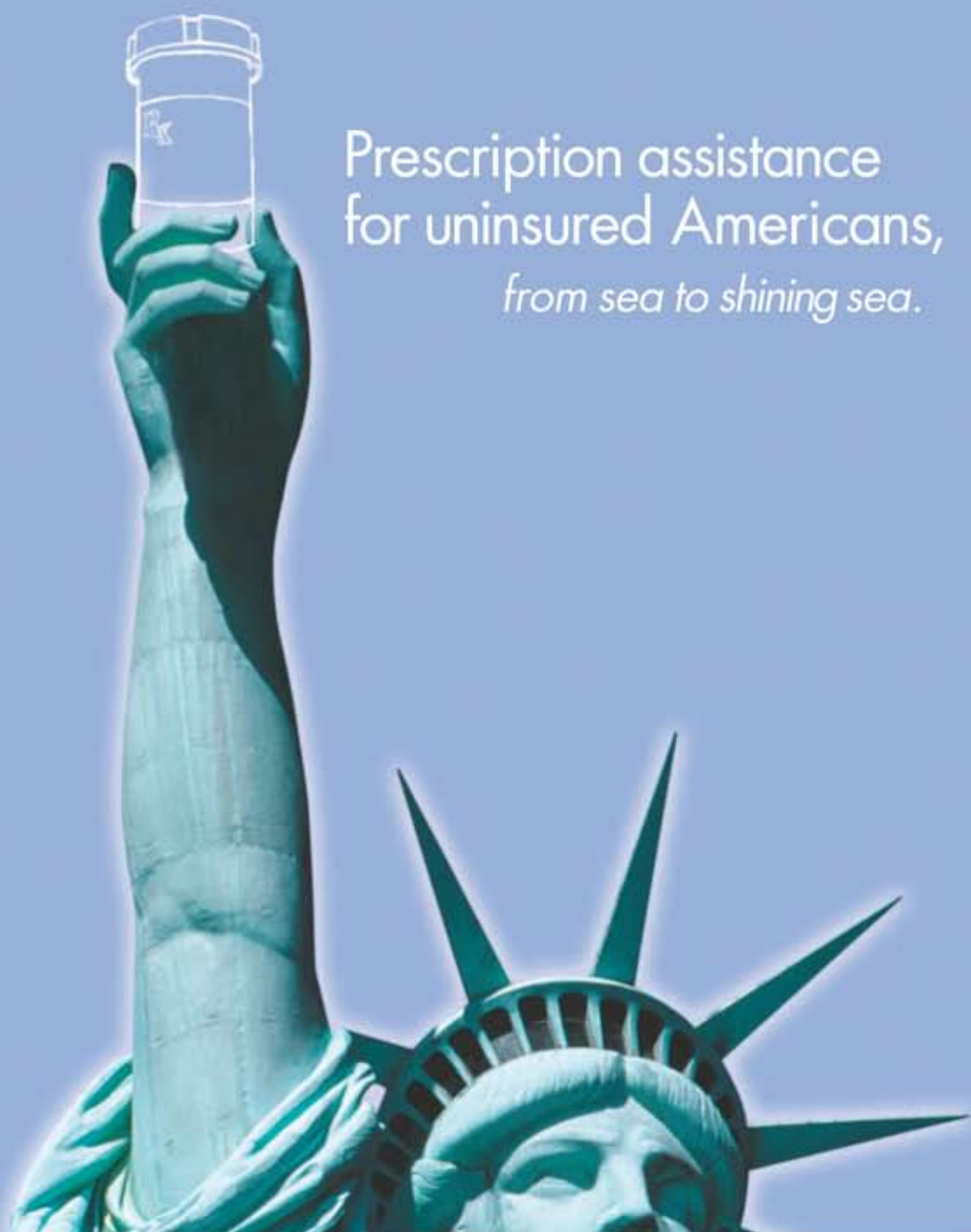
One way my committee is contributing to the battle against obesity is through a partnership with Health Corps, an educational and mentoring program that educates American youth on the workings of the human body, and looks to motivate our young people to become health advocates in their communities. Health Corps was founded by cardiac surgeon, best-selling author and Oprah Winfrey show regular, Dr. Mehmet Oz, who was propelled to action after operating on many overweight young adult patients with blocked arteries.

Dr. Oz and I recognize the need for a change in attitudes and lifestyles, a major step that requires a new mode of education, not only for our youth, but also for school faculty and parents. Highlighting simple steps to healthier lifestyles, the program's health coordinators urge students to read food labels, carry pedometers and walk at least 10,000 steps daily. What I particularly like about the program is the way in which it encourages our students to become agents of change.

The Health Corps, employing a team of idealistic health coordinators, delivers its nutritional and fitness education to students throughout the city. Backed by a strong public-private partnership, the Health Corps initiative spans 35 high schools in four states, including 28 New York metropolitan schools that benefit from a \$2 million appropriation from City Council that I helped secure.

Given the gravity of our burgeoning health crisis, it is essential that we look for ways to break the unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that will, if we're not successful at altering them, inevitably bankrupt our entire health care system. The Health Corps model and Dr. Oz's visionary work are the kind of dramatic steps that we need to change our country's unhealthy direction. I am grateful that I've been able to collaborate with the doctor's vision for the future, and I am also deeply appreciative for the support of my City Council colleagues in this vital task ahead. **CT**

Joel Rivera is a Democrat representing parts of the Bronx in the City Council, the Council's majority leader and the chair of its Health Committee.



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