Hello, I’m Sarah Gollust, an Assistant Professor in Health Policy and Management at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. Along with Susie Nanney, an Associate Professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Minnesota Medical School, we are pleased to introduce this webinar, entitled “Using Obesity Research More Effectively to Shape State Policy.”

We have three main objectives in this presentation, based on a research study we have conducted over the last two years. First, we will identify how research evidence is used in Minnesota decision-making about policies and programs related to childhood obesity prevention. Second, we will describe the barriers some stakeholders in childhood obesity policymaking and programming face in using evidence. We will also describe some recommendations they have for overcoming these barriers. Finally, we will introduce several resources to help you learn more about using evidence more effectively.

I want to acknowledge our research team and funders. In addition to myself and Dr. Nanney, we have worked with a number of students at the University of Minnesota, whose names are listed here. In addition, we collaborate with Susan Weisman at the Public Health Law Center, Rachel Callanan at the American Heart Association, several staff members at the Minnesota Department of Health, including Susan Bishop, Bill Burleson, and Martha Roberts. And finally, we want to acknowledge our collaborators in the Minnesota House of Representatives, Representative Bob Dettmer and Representative Kim Norton. We received funding for this project from the University of Minnesota Healthy Foods Healthy Lives Institute and the National Institutes of Health.

Our study consisted of interviews that lasted about 45 minutes to one hour with 51 key stakeholders in the area of childhood obesity prevention in Minnesota. Most of the interviews took place in the Fall of 2012. The participants included 16 people from the legislature – including legislators, legislative researchers, and other aides and staff. We also included 16 state agency staff from the Minnesota Departments of Health, Education, and Transportation. Finally, we included 19 health advocates who had taken positions both for and against past childhood obesity-related legislation. The interviews focused on three main aspects: first participants’ use of research evidence in their jobs, second the challenges or barriers they face to using evidence in the work that they do, and three their recommendations about how to more effectively translate research evidence into policy and program decisions.

This slide summarizes our major findings across the three groups included in the study.
We found that those in the legislative sphere believed that research evidence should be considered in designing programs and policies, especially to support other types of persuasive information that they use in their policy work, such as feedback from constituents, stories or narratives, and political principles. But, many felt they do not have the time or resources to find and use evidence consistently. Stage agency staff use research evidence very frequently in designing and evaluating their programs, but many face organizational or administrative barriers in communicating that evidence to other key stakeholders in policymaking. Finally, health advocates use research evidence to support their positions, but they often find it difficult to overcome the persuasive power of personal narratives and political or personal values in the political process.

All of the study participants discussed some important barriers to using evidence in their work. The two major types of barriers concerned insufficient evidence or infrastructure and the lack of personal relationships. For example, participants – especially those in the legislative sphere – described a situation of information overload. They receive so much information from people and interest groups throughout the state and they don’t have time to wade through even a fraction of it, especially when it comes in formats that are long or inaccessible, like lengthy research reports. We also heard about a mismatch between the evidence about obesity that is readily available – like its prevalence or its health or economic consequences – and the types of evidence that they think are needed, such as the specific outcomes of programs and policies, return on investment, and the cost-effectiveness of programs. With regard to relationships, we heard that there are only limited existing relationships between state decision-makers and researchers producing research evidence, which can create a lack of mutual understanding or trust which can inhibit decision makers from accessing or using research to its fullest extent. Finally, we heard from stakeholders that they may want to consult research evidence, but they do not know who to call to find the right resources or people.

This quote from a study participant in the Minnesota legislature really exemplifies the differences between researchers and legislators and the lack of personal relationships they have:

> This person said, “Academics is a really important part of society and doing research is really important but I often find that researchers are out of touch with the legislators. We’re just in two different universes. They’re rewarded for doing research, they get grants for doing research, they’re not rewarded for disseminating and getting it into policy. That’s what we do. So there’s the two worlds that don’t mix very well.”

Despite these barriers, study participants also cited a lot of strengths of the current system in Minnesota. Many commented on the strengths of the research generated at the University of Minnesota as well as the strong connections among advocates and coalitions that exist in the obesity prevention world, such as the Minnesota Coalition for Healthy Kids.
We also heard from those in the legislature that they have a really strong legislative library and system of accessing research through the House and Senate research services. We also have the advantage of strong and respected state agency programs to combat obesity that are building evidence and best practices, such as the Statewide Health Improvement Program or SHIP. Finally, there are a number of very credible sources of evidence about obesity that stakeholders draw from, including the University of Minnesota, the CDC, the Institute of Medicine, the Minnesota Department of Health, and the American Heart Association.

We heard a wide range of recommendations from the 51 stakeholders about how to improve the translation of research evidence into policymaking and programming around obesity prevention. They can be best summarized in three main points.

First, we need to bridge research and communication gaps, by finding ways for researchers and decision-makers to work together more closely to produce research evidence that is timely for legislative decisions and is also locally-relevant. We need to recognize that to be most useful for decision-makers, evidence should be presented in accessible formats, such as one-page summaries that use bullet points and infographics to present key points. We also heard that stories and personal narratives can be really effective and persuasive, so packaging stories with data – what one respondent called the “golden money package” – is essential.

Second, we need to build new infrastructure for evidence translation. In the short term, participants recommended a topic-specific research expert list so decision-makers could contact the relevant experts on policy strategies related to healthy eating and active living. For the long term, participants recommended developing some kind of searchable web-based clearinghouse of research syntheses on topics related to policy priorities.

Third, we need to broaden our approaches to research by involving external stakeholders – including legislators, agency staff, and health advocates – early in the process of research to brainstorm research questions and design studies together. And finally, many recommended increasing opportunities for networking between researchers and these stakeholders outside of academia to establish and maintain trusting personal relationships.

In response to all that we have learned in this study, we have developed a few resources that we want to share with you that we hope you will find useful. All of these resources are available as part of this webinar package. First, to learn more about our study and findings, we have developed brief reports summarizing the study overall and those targeted specifically for legislators, state agencies, and health advocates. Second, we have developed an expert list that is directly responsive to our study participants’ questions about who they can call for expertise. This list offers the names and contact
information, as well as whether they are willing to testify on a topic of their expertise, of the research experts on policy-relevant topics related to healthy eating and active living. Third, we have developed five informational presentations that succinctly present timely research evidence on locally-relevant school-based policies to promote child health. The package of presentations is called “Minnesota School Food and Activity Environments: Yesterday, Today, and Patterns” and there are specific presentations on topics including physical activity policies, sugary drinks in schools, promotions for school foods, wellness policies, and the overall effectiveness of school policies and practices. Finally, we have included an online evaluation that we hope everyone listening will complete, so we can learn more about what resources would be useful to you in translating research into policymaking and programming related to obesity prevention.

These are pictures of the research briefs I mentioned where you can learn more about our study’s findings and recommendations. They also include some great quotes from our study participants on the reverse side. We hope you will take a look!

We very much appreciate your attention to this presentation, which we hope you found interesting and useful. Here we have listed our project website and the citation to our work. Thank you very much!