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Testimony in Support of HB 2444 14 March 2016

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Kevin Walker and I am Regional Vice President of Advocacy for the American Heart Association. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 2444. My testimony is limited to the sections of the bill that relate to sales tax rates for food. I offer no comment on the other sections of the bill.

Obesity rates are nearing epidemic proportions. The reasons for this are multi-faceted and there is no single “silver bullet” that will turn the tide of this national health crisis. A combination of regular physical activity and proper diet are essential to achieving optimal weight. HB 2444 takes a step in the right direction by lowering the sales tax on certain food items but leaving in place the higher sales tax on items such as candy, soft drinks and foods sold through vending machines.

Creating a price differential creates an incentive for consumers to consider more nutritious options that can lead to improved health outcomes and cost savings over time. We must recognize that items with little or no nutritional value are making up larger parts of the American diet and contributing to our nation’s health problems. There is increasing evidence that price can play an important role in the purchasing decisions of consumers. The attached fact sheet offers additional information on this approach.

While HB 2444 does not create a price differential at the levels suggested in the attached fact sheet the bill is a step in the right direction. I should point out that the definition of food in this bill still allows for cookies, cakes, and other items low in nutritional value to be taxed at the new, lower rate.

If we want to use pricing as a strategy for encouraging healthy behaviors I would suggest that the lower sales tax rate should be applied only to food items that are nutrient dense including fruits, vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy products and whole grains.

Our health care costs are increasing year-after-year and it is important that we use the tools available to us to help change course.

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