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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Union Community Health Center Commits to Role Modeling Environment With the Launch of SSB Free Zones

In Support of Improved Health Outcomes for the Bronx, Local Stakeholders and Policy Makers Are Among Those Taking the Pledge

BRONX, NEW YORK, July 15, 2015 – Today Union Community Health Center (UCHC) celebrates the official launch of their SSB Free Zone Initiative where staff will sign pledges making a commitment to eliminate sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) across all sites. UCHC is the first community health center in New York State to introduce SSB Free Zones and create a role modeling environment for patients. This outward show of commitment has already gained support from local Bronx officials and the Department of Health (DOH) including New York State Senator Gustavo Rivera, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Assemblyman Victor Pichardo and keynote speaker Dr. Jane Bedell, Assistant Commissioner and Medical Director at the New York DOH, all who participated in today's launch.

"Obesity has become an epidemic in this country and over the past year, I have seen an alarming number of my pediatric patients with early onset of chronic diseases like obesity, fatty liver disease and diabetes," said **Vanessa Salcedo, M.D.**, pediatrician at Union Community Health Center who is spearheading the initiative. "Although most parents know that soda is not good for children, many still believe that other sugary drinks like fruit juice are healthy. Decreasing all types of SSBs is a small change that will lead to a big impact."

The Bronx is one of the poorest and sickest communities in New York State (NYS). Statewide data gathered by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shows that while there have been improvements in health outcomes in the Bronx, it is still the unhealthiest county ranking 62nd out of 62 NYS counties for six straight years. The empirical data shows that obesity, fatty liver disease and diabetes are disproportionately found in the Bronx and there is a direct correlation between SSB consumption and these diseases.

"Union Community Health Center serves a community that has limited accessibility to quality health resources," said **Dr. Douglas York**, CEO of Union Community Health Center. "The SSB Free Zone initiative takes what UCHC doctors are doing a step further with role modeling action. If we want our patients to be receptive to our recommendations we must first show them through our own behavior."

"Bronxites are surrounded by unhealthy food and beverage options every day that have a damaging effect on their overall health", said **State Senator Gustavo Rivera**. "To be effective at combating obesity in the Bronx, we must continue to highlight how making small lifestyle changes, like not consuming sodas, can improve an individual's health. I commend UCHC for taking the initial step of eliminating sugar-sweetened beverages from their sites in an effort to both encourage others to do the same and help educate the public of how these drinks damage their health."

As part of the SSB Free Zone launch, UCHC has committed to taking the following steps to eliminate SSBs from their sites:

- Encourage staff and patients to make healthier beverage choices.
- Eliminate beverages with added sugars from vending machines and not serving SSBs at meetings.
- Make water available.
- Champion UCHC staff to take the pledge and educate their colleagues on the benefits of remaining SSB Free.

“The implementation of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Free Zones at UCHC will have a substantial impact on patient outcomes and on the community’s health overall in my district and across the Bronx,” said **Assemblyman Victor Pichardo**. “I applaud UCHC’s effort to make our community a healthier place to work, live and grow.”

In an effort to roll out a comprehensive campaign that takes into account the community’s voice and need, UCHC sought the assistance of CUNY School of Public Health to gather the opinion of community members via focus groups. The consensus among focus group participants was that they need more education about the effects of sugar-sweetened beverages. UCHC leaned on one of their strongest partners, the New York Department of Health, to secure a wide array of educational resources that have been made readily available to staff, patients and the community.

“Sugary drinks are the leading source of added sugar in our diet and are a key driver of the obesity epidemic in the Bronx,” said **Dr. Jane Bedell, Assistant Commissioner for the Bronx District Public Health Office**. “We applaud the Union Community Health Center staff for leading by example and reducing sugary drink consumption at the health center. The staff will help affect change at the neighborhood level by being role models for the patients they serve.”

For more information on the SSB Free Zone initiative, contact: Luz Correa, Director of Public Affairs [718.618.8590](tel:718.618.8590)/lcorrea@uchcbronx.org.

About Union Community Health Center

Union Community Health Center (Union) is a not-for-profit Federally Qualified Health Center providing approximately 179,000 medical, dental and physical rehabilitation visits each year to approximately 37,000 individual patients at its five locations in the Bronx. Union’s mission is to provide comprehensive, culturally competent primary and preventive health care services to improve the health and decrease health disparities of the medically underserved populations in the Bronx, providing services to all regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or the ability to pay. To learn more about Union Community Health Center, visit www.uchcbronx.org.