November 3, 2011

Tom Cochran, CEO and Executive Director  
United States Conference of Mayors  
1620 Eye Street, Northwest  
Washington, DC  20006

Re: Community Grant Program with ABA

Dear Mr. Cochran:

We are writing to express our surprise and disappointment upon learning of the Conference of Mayors’ (USCM) deepening financial relationship with the American Beverage Association, an organization that opposes municipal efforts to reduce the consumption of sugary drinks. The Conference’s partnership (2012 Childhood Obesity Prevention Program) with sugary-drink producers inevitably will enable the soda industry to frustrate its members’ efforts to combat obesity in their cities.

Although it is gratifying to see the USCM show interest in the important issue of childhood obesity, it is distressing that the organization would align with the principal business interests that have stood most firmly in the way of progress on obesity prevention. USCM’s arrangement with ABA certainly will not facilitate the USCM’s ability to promote policy measures that are inconsistent with the soda industry’s financial interests. According to the June 20, 2011, press announcement, ABA pledged three-year support “to highlight better solutions (emphasis added) to reducing obesity in communities across the country.” Your statement in that release seems to acknowledge that the award comes at a time “when communities need additional funding” … “to implement better way solutions (emphasis added) to the societal challenge of obesity.”

It’s hard to imagine how the small, new grant program, “focused on educating children and families about the importance of balancing calories and regular physical activity as ways to achieve a healthy, active and balanced lifestyle,” will achieve anything more than to distract mayors and municipalities from potentially effective public health approaches that the ABA and other soda interests have aggressively opposed.

The creation of this program strongly suggests that the funding and implementation of “new” and “better” policy directions are intentionally linked. Dangerously, for small and mid-sized towns that win grants, the tiny awards will likely be sufficient to ensure that most, if not all, of the local program and policy initiatives will be consistent with industry’s opposition to more promising policy directions.
The Conference of Mayors’ ABA grant program reflects yet another soda-industry effort to use “philanthropy” to prevent the adoption of more effective measures by USCM’s members. Notably, ABA’s small awards will amount to only a tiny fraction of potential revenues that would be available to municipalities that taxed sugary drinks at reasonable levels. That’s a great deal for the ABA, but a raw deal for families. New soda-tax revenue, if used for evidence-based public programs to fight obesity, could really do some good.

Several aspects of the grant program described on USCM’s website reveal industry’s heavy hand in its implementation and direction. Of three judges who will select winning applications, one will be selected by the ABA; the ABA will develop the selection criteria; the top three winners will be required to participate in a local, promotional press event featuring ABA and USCM; and the childhood obesity grant contest will consider only programs that focus on measures of political comfort to the soda industry: balanced diet, regular physical activity, and consumer education. Although important, those areas constitute only a narrow slice of the “key elements to the childhood obesity solution.”

Public-private partnerships have their place. However, this grant awards program is not one of them. It would more serve the interests of industry than those of the residents of the “winning” cities. Just as the ABA and its related foundations have sought to spread money around in other places to forestall public-health-oriented policies on sugary drinks, such as in Philadelphia (where Mayor Nutter wisely rejected the tainted funds), the ABA is using the USCM to boost the soda industry’s reputation and reduce support for effective public policy initiatives to combat childhood and societal obesity.

We respectfully urge the USCM to withdraw from its partnership with the American Beverage Association. Instead, we urge the Conference of Mayors to encourage its members’ efforts to tax sugary drinks and other measures that would be more effective ways to improve diets and promote health.

Sincerely,

George A. Hacker                        Julie Greenstein
Senior Policy Advisor                   Deputy Director
Health Promotion                        Health Promotion Policy

Cc:
Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa, President (mayor@lacity.org)
Mayor Michael A. Nutter, Vice President (Michael.Nutter@phila.gov)
Mayor Scott Smith, Second Vice President ((mayor.smith@mesaaz.gov)