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### **EDITORIAL: Obese workers pay more**

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The trend is clear: States are moving toward health insurance policies with higher premiums for state workers who have identifiable health risks.

South Carolina recently took steps to charge public employees more for health care if they smoke or if their insured dependents smoke. Under the proposed state plan, each employee who falls into that category would have to pay \$25 a month extra for health insurance than nonsmokers.

Seven other states already charge smokers more. And a number of states also are looking at other health risks.

Notably, Alabama recently adopted a policy in which obese state workers would be charged more. Alabama's 37,527 employees will be given a year to start getting fit, or they'll pay \$25 a month for insurance that otherwise is free.

That makes Alabama the first state to charge overweight state workers who don't make an effort to slim down. Alabama already is among the states that charge workers who smoke -- and it has experienced some success in getting them to quit.

But the decision to address the problem of obesity is obvious. Alabama has the third-highest obesity rate in the nation, with 30.1 percent of its population in that category. Only Mississippi, with 31.7 percent, and West Virginia, with 30.6 percent, were higher.

Obesity plagues the South. Nine of the top 10 fattest states are below the Mason-Dixon Line. South Carolina is 10th, with a 29.2 percent rate. And no state showed a decrease in obesity over the past year.

Health care officials assert that obesity-related problems are real and predictable. Screenings of overweight people often turn up serious problems with blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes.

While obese workers in Alabama might balk at paying extra for health insurance, the policy clearly is designed to help them adopt healthier habits. Once workers have been screened, those with obesity-related problems will have a year to see a doctor at not cost, enroll in a wellness program or take steps on their own to improve their health.

If they show progress in a follow-up screening, they won't be charged. But if they don't they must pay starting in January 2011.

South Carolina, among the top 10 fattest states, might want to consider following Alabama's example.