

# CapitalGO!

## POLICY MAKERS LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Obesity continues to be a barrier to health, productivity, and quality of life in the United States. Here in Arkansas, in fact, obesity may be the healthcare threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

ACCORDING TO THE nonprofit health policy organization Trust for America's Health (TFAH), Arkansas ranked No. 6 in the nation in 2017 for rates of obesity among adults. Not surprisingly, when you consider that number, as a state, we also rank No. 4 for hypertension and No. 7 for diabetes. Of particular note, they also report Arkansans as the second most physically inactive population in the country.

What that translates to, financially, is \$1.25 billion in yearly obesity-related expenditures in Arkansas.

These are sobering numbers, but there's also a lot of hope. An issue brief from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and TFAH indicates that just a 5-percent reduction in the BMI numbers of Arkansans can have a huge impact. By getting Arkansas moving, not only would we be preventing thousands of cases of stroke, heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension, but the healthcare savings could total more than \$2 billion in the next 10 years—and \$6 billion over 20 years.

### MOVING TO LEAD

At the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement (ACHI), we took notice of the successful *A Healthier State* initiative launched in South Carolina to combat the negative health impacts of physical inactivity. A program of the South Carolina Hospital Association, it expanded in January 2016 to become an opportunity for the South Carolina general assembly to lead by example.

Running from January to June, *A Healthier State House* promoted increased physical activity through friendly competition among South Carolina's legislators and agency staff. As a result, participants lost 98 total pounds and 31 inches in the waist. At the beginning of the challenge, 87 percent of participants were overweight or obese and by the end of the challenge, that number dropped to 69 percent.

Like many great ideas, we believed this program could be adapted to produce similar results in Arkansas. Gov. Asa Hutchinson had already launched Healthy Active Arkansas (a 10-year framework for encouraging and enabling healthier lifestyles in Arkansas) in 2015. So, at ACHI, we launched the *CapitolGo! Challenge*, which brought many of the priorities of Healthy Active Arkansas to the forefront.

### STEPPING UP IN ARKANSAS

Much like *A Healthier State House*, the *CapitolGo! Challenge* ran through the 2017 state legislative session and encouraged competition among Arkansas legislators, the Governor's Office, and staff. *CapitolGo!* highlighted the importance of healthy choices and physical activity by encouraging participants to log their steps in a smartphone app as part of a walking challenge. ACHI staff helped by providing technical assistance, and a spirit of friendly competition emerged that served as additional

**Joseph W. Thompson, MD, MPH**  
Director, Arkansas Center for Health Improvement



encouragement to keep participants on board during a busy legislative session. By the end of the challenge, members of the House, Senate, and Governor's Office had taken a combined 33,362,137 steps.

Individual and team winners were recognized; these included Representative Richard Womack in first place; Senator Larry Teague in second place, and Amy Fecher of the Governor's Office in third place. The Arkansas State Senate finished in first place among all teams. Participants in the House logged an average of 5,140 steps per day, while the average in the Senate was 6,743 steps. Participants in the Governor's Office walked an average of 4,556 steps per day. Perhaps best of all, we relished hearing reports of weight loss and increased energy among participants.

Prior to launching the challenge, I had the privilege of briefing the public health committee about the goals and priority areas of Healthy Active Arkansas. This proved to be a catalyst for the passage of a Senate and House resolution, supporting the efforts of the Healthy Active Arkansas plan in combating obesity in our state. In the resolution, the general assembly encourages a "health in all policies" approach to promote healthy eating and physical activity and increase awareness of the negative health impact of obesity.

For this year's *CapitolGo! Challenge*, we are focusing on hydration and the reduction of sugar-sweetened beverages. Participants will again use a special app to log their water consumption throughout the same time period (the 2018 legislative session). Participation this year has also expanded to include all the constitutional officers and their staff, including the offices of Lt. Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, Auditor, Treasurer, and Land Commissioner—in addition to the House, Senate, and Governor's Office.



***CapitolGo!*** highlighted the importance of healthy choices and physical activity by encouraging participants to log their steps in a smartphone app as part of a walking challenge.

#### **PASSING IT ON**

At ACHI, we've already heard from representatives at a health policy organization in another state expressing interest in implementing a similar program. We hope other states will continue to look to South Carolina and Arkansas as examples of innovation in physical activity and healthier lifestyle choices.

Tackling the obesity crisis can seem like an overwhelming mission—a task that one can't do alone. But it starts with each and every one of us, and it will surely take innovative ideas and solutions such as South

Carolina's *A Healthier State House* initiative and the *CapitolGo! Challenge* here in Arkansas. Every marathon begins with that first step.

I believe we've already begun to show that good—and simple—ideas can not only catch on and spread, but can be effective and fun.

I challenge you to consider what you can do to integrate more physical activity into your daily life and promote healthy lifestyle choices among your family and friends.

What are we waiting for? Let's get moving. ■