Ark. Gov. Promises to Focus on Health

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LITTLE ROCK -- Gov. Mike Huckabee announced Tuesday that his Healthy Arkansas initiative will be the dominant theme of the remaining two-plus years of his time as governor.

The goal of the program is to build Arkansas into one of the healthiest states in the nation. Now, Arkansas ranks at the bottom in many health categories. Huckabee said the state will use its existing recourses and new funding to help show Arkansans the wisdom of shedding unhealthy habits.

Huckabee said his plan incorporates past initiatives, including the ARKids First health insurance program for children and the voter-approved tobacco spending program.

"Both of those initiatives are making this a healthier state. This is the next logical step in our efforts. We must convince Arkansans that the key to real change is a behavioral change," Huckabee said in comments provided by the governor's office.

"We eat the wrong foods. We smoke too much. We don't exercise enough. If a person maintains a normal body weight, exercises at least three times each week and doesn't use tobacco, that person will live an average of 13 years longer than he or she would live otherwise."

By 2007, Huckabee wants the state Health Department to increase from 64 percent to 85 percent the percentage of children who are getting exercise at least three times a week for at least 20 minutes and increase from 15 percent to 30 percent the percentage of adults who exercise the same amount.

The governor wants the percentage of obese children to drop from 11 percent to 5 percent and wants to reduce the percentage of obese adults from 23 percent to 15 percent.

Huckabee also wants to reduce smoking from 36 percent to 16 percent of adolescents and from 24 percent of adults to 12 percent.

Huckabee noted that the Medicaid program in Arkansas costs almost $3 billion per year and is growing at an annual rate of about 9 percent.

"We must rein in the cost of this program," Huckabee said. "Five percent of the Medicaid cases are taking 50 percent of the Medicaid budget."

The governor said state government will considering giving state workers a break in their health insurance costs for healthy behavior. A pilot program within the state Medicaid program will be started to help improve health habits among recipients.