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In the land of deep fried, one man's health crusade

By Suzi Parker | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

LITTLE ROCK, ARK. - When Governor Mike Huckabee visited a local school last winter, he hoisted a seventh-grader across his back like a sack of hominy grits and paraded around the gym. With the conviction of a preacher at a tent revival, Mr. Huckabee urged the students to change their ways. The 90-pound girl he carried illustrated how much weight he lost in one year.

Now the governor is carrying out what may be the nation's most ambitious crusade to put an entire state on a diet. He has launched a "Healthy Arkansas" initiative aimed at enlisting every one from business executives to school teachers in the battle against bulge. "If I can become fit and healthy, anyone can," says Huckabee, who lost 100 lbs. in a year.

He isn't the only chief executive targeting obesity. Georgia's governor threw away his Snickers bars when he issued a "Capital Challenge" to lose weight in 2003. The governor of Texas encouraged people to lace up sneakers to train for a 10K run. In South Carolina last week, the governor led a 170-mile bike ride.

But perhaps no one has tackled the caloric challenge facing Americans with quite the passion of Huckabee.

Promoting healthy eating and exercise has become a personal crusade for this governor living in the land of lard and lemonade. After being warned by physicians that he was dangerously overweight, Huckabee joined a weight-loss program and started running for the first time since junior high. Soon he was taking his suits to be altered.

"At first you can't believe your pants are getting this baggy," he says. "Then you try to belt them and the two back pockets come together."

Growing up a Southern Baptist, the governor jokes, he bowed his head over potlucks as often as he bowed his head in the pew.

"In the South, it's fried fish, fried okra, fried chicken, and pie, pie, pie," says Huckabee. No more. He's traded in potato chips for crisp apples and is a happier man for it.

Huckabee is unwavering in his commitment to introduce behavorial change in a state where convenience stores sell fried chicken alongside cigarettes. He wants children to bypass fried Twinkies at the state fair and wants adults to crush their cigarette habit. His concern lies in escalating healthcare costs - especially for the impoverished.

"We can't afford to keep being unhealthy," says Dr. Faye Boozman, director for the Arkansas Department of Health. "At this rate, Arkansas could foresee a future ... [without] paved roads or a decent education system because of escalating health costs."

Arkansas isn't alone in its obesity battle. In 1991, only four states - Louisiana, Mississippi, Michigan, and West Virginia - had a 15 percent or greater of their population considered obese. By 2001, only one state, Colorado, remained under that 15 percent. Arkansans' myriad chronic health ailments induced by obesity and smoking top national charts. (Twenty-six percent of Arkansas adults smoke, as does 35 percent of its high school population.)

Huckabee, who runs and cycles daily, once ignored healthy meal choices and disdained exercise. That changed after a diabetes diagnosis. "Certainly now I have to make some choices about what I eat, like grill instead of fried, and getting up to exercise, but when you feel good, you want to do this."

The governor is constantly looking for new ways to spread his health message.

Last week, smoking within 25 feet of state agency entrances was banned. Each state agency will also begin to study a potential smoking ban on all state property. The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and the state Health Department has already announced a ban on all smoking on their campuses.

"We would like to see a more assertive approach like New York City, a potential ban on smoking in all public places, and a bumped up cigarette tax," says Dr. David Bourne, medical director for the state Health Department, who often lobbies for stricter smoking regulations.

Arkansas has also become one of the first in the nation to expand Medicaid coverage to include nicotine patches and counseling.

The governor hopes to expand his initiatives to the private sector, especially Arkansas-based businesses like Tyson and Wal-Mart. He's already making inroads. At J.B. Hunt Transport Services, Inc., a large northwest Arkansas trucking operation, the company recently identified health insurance expenditures affected by unhealthy lifestyles. Now, employees receive health counseling and advice.

"We're saving millions of dollars in medical costs," says Mark Greenway of J.B. Hunt's human resources. "We're building a healthier workforce that misses fewer days of work."

Huckabee is also finding a national audience. Last month, Huckabee addressed the Department of Health and Human Services on preventive healthcare. Next month, he will speak at a national obesity summit in Williamsburg, Va.

"[But] this isn't about me or government being the grease police," Huckabee says. "I'm the last person who wants to be preaching or be a fanatic."

• *Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.*

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