BATTLE LINES

The Houston Wellness Association remains engaged in the fight against obesity and diabetes

By Dr. Jeffrey A. Ross

Coming off it's highly successful inaugural Obesity Summit and Worksite Wellness conference last November, the Houston Wellness Association (HWA) and Mayor's Wellness Council (MWC) are in full swing heading into the spring, with several events on tap both here in Houston, as well as in Austin.

Among the initiatives is a Houston obesity summit, currently in the planning stages, and the sixth annual Texas Round-Up statewide fitness program, designed to motivate and encourage Texans to become more active and incorporate healthy choices in their daily lives. It culminates with a 10K race in Austin on April 29.

As co-chair of the Governor's Advisory Council on Physical Fitness and as vice chair of the Texas Department of State Health Services Council, I have been on the front lines in the battle against childhood and adult obesity and the epidemic of type 2 diabetes by encouraging school exercise and adult activity.

The HWA and MWC work in concert to combat this challenge. We have been successful initially in helping to get Houston off the top spot in *Men's Fitness* magazine's "Fattest Cities" list. (Houston ranks sixth in the '09 rankings.)

But our work is just beginning. I have been working in Austin with the Department of State Health Services, the Texas Education Agency and the Governor's Advisory Council on Physical Fitness to promote the establishment of school health advisory councils (SHAC) to encourage exercise in the schools and improve lunch eating habits and menus. The SHACs bring together school principals, parents, school nurses, school nutritionists and physical education teachers. Our hope is that every school district in Texas will soon have school health advisory councils.

The Governor's Advisory Council on Physical Fitness is charged with establishing new Mayor's Wellness Councils across the state of Texas. Using grant money, we reviewed applications of large, medium and small towns in Texas vying for assistance in developing new and existing councils. Houston, along with Austin, was one of the first cities to establish a Mayor's Wellness Council. The Get Moving Houston program was designed to promote participation in local and statewide physical activities and individual health awareness programs.

To achieve this goal, the MWC has partnered with the city of Houston Department of Heath and Human Services to conduct community resource assessments in the Magnolia Park, Sunnyside and Independence Heights communities. The MWC works with the targeted communities to develop and/or promote physical fitness and wellness programs.

The Texas Round Up provides Texans with the tools needed to establish regular physical activity routines and healthy habits. The program includes a free online activity tracking system and an educational component emphasizing the benefits of regular exercise. With more than 60,000 participants using the online tool to log their fitness activities, thousands of Texans have seen great improvements in their overall health. People are encouraged to participate in the program by completing and logging 30 minutes of physical activity at least five days per week for six weeks.

On April 25 the Texas Round-Up issues Governor's Challenge Awards to cities, state agencies, schools, social organizations, families and friends that have the highest participation rate per capita in their respective categories. To encourage children to establish healthy habits, the Round-Up's FitKids program also includes the Governor's Challenge.

It takes a constant effort in order to make change and see improvements. Obesity, a lack of exercise and poor nutrition is everyone's problem, and eventually we all pay for it, either with decreased longevity in our children, increased medical costs, decreased productivity in the workplace and disability. This is a tsunami that has arrived, and we can no longer run away from it. We have to combat it head-on.

Jeffrey Ross is an associate clinical professor at Baylor College of Medicine and chief of the Diabetic Foot Clinic at Ben Taub General Hospital. He is a fellow of the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons and of the American College of Sports Medicine. A past president of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine, Ross specializes in sports medicine and has run 25 marathons and over a dozen triathlons.