Gov. Rick Perry’s Remarks to Conference on Children’s Obesity in Texas

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

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Thank you, Anita. The state of Texas is blessed to have a First Lady who has made the same commitment that many here today have made that helping Texans live healthy lives is more than a career, it is a lifelong passion. And the Perry family is just as fortunate because she has made our health, well-being and safety her top priority for the past 22 years.

It is my honor to be here with my friend, Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs who is doing a great job and taking a leading role in the fight against childhood obesity. Susan, thank you for chairing this conference and keep up the good work. It’s good to see so many elected officials, business and community leaders, and health professionals, and non-profit employees who have been strong allies in our efforts to help Texas children lead healthier lives.

I think my running partner, Paul Carrozza, is here but I’m not quite sure since most of the time I only see the back of his head. Paul, if you’re out there thanks for joining us. It’s also good to see several other members of the Governor’s Advisory Council on Physical Fitness including Dr. Jose Gonzalez, Chris Kyker, Dr. Jeff Ross, Reenie Smith and Todd Whitthorne.

We are here today because there is a major health crisis impacting Texas today and casting a dark shadow over our future. Today in Texas, millions of our children are on a pathway to serious health problems that will result in shorter lives plagued by poor health because they are overweight or obese. Poor nutrition and poor exercise habits will rob them of a bright future, cause them to suffer from illnesses that are preventable, and force Texas taxpayers and Texas employers to pay a dire cost.

We are blessed to live in a country where many of the things we need are available at the push of a button in the comfort of our own homes, but the sedentary lifestyle of the average American is having serious repercussions not only on individuals but society as a whole. A lack of fitness costs Texas taxpayers and businesses $10 billion each year due to increased use of the healthcare system and lost productivity in the workplace.

Five out of eight Texas adults are considered overweight or obese an alarming increase of 33 percent from just one decade ago. What concerns me even more is that one out of three Texas children, 35 percent to be exact, are considered overweight or obese. If nothing is done to change poor eating and exercise habits among our children, the youngest generation is likely to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. If any one disease shortened the lifespan of a generation of Americans we would consider it to be nothing short of an epidemic. But make no mistake
about it, we are facing an epidemic, an epidemic of obesity that can be prevented with physical activity and dietary changes.

As parents, we would never allow our children to play in a busy city street but as a society we are doing the equivalent when it comes to childhood obesity. That’s why this conference is so important. Today, we not only hope to come to a better understanding of the problem of childhood obesity but to take definitive steps towards a long term solution.

Building a healthier Texas is one of the top goals of my administration. A healthier Texas is about much more than putting money into public assistance programs, it starts with the personal responsibility each Texan must assume for their own health and each parent must assume for the health of their children.

Despite all the advances in medical science there is still no magic pill or formula that will bring overall good health. The key to good health lies in making healthier choices, a change in lifestyle that includes eating better and more exercise. While each individual is responsible for what they choose to eat and how they choose to spend their free time, I believe that government can and must help Texans begin to make healthier choices.

That’s why I created the Governor’s Advisory Council on Physical Fitness which is charged with reviewing the activities of the state physical fitness programs, developing strategies to encourage better nutrition and physical fitness, and working with local communities to increase opportunities for physical activity. The advisory council played a key role in the creation of the Texas Round-Up program, a statewide initiative designed to encourage all Texans to incorporate daily physical activity and healthy choices into their lives.

More than 5,500 Texans participated in the first annual Texas Round-Up fitness festival and 10K challenge held earlier this year in Austin which featured races for children, opportunities to meet professional athletes and other activities designed to let young Texans know that exercise can be fun as well as challenging. More than 22,000 people signed up for the online, personalized training program intended to help Texans develop a long-term plan of action for daily exercise.

By exercising for merely 30 minutes a day, a few days each week, Texans can reduce the odds of disease and illness, lower the cost of health care and live more productive lives. With only one in four Texans getting the recommended daily amount of exercise, the Texas Round-Up program is helping children and adults combat obesity and it has the potential to have an even greater impact in the years to come.

Excess weight is a leading cause of childhood diabetes a growing problem that threatens thousand of Texas children. A Texan that develops diabetes in childhood will grow up to be two to four times as likely to die of heart disease or stroke and will face increased odds of blindness and lower limb amputation. That’s why two years ago I launched a new Diabetes Education Initiative aimed at providing Texans with healthy eating and physical fitness guidelines to prevent and control the disease.

And it’s also one of the reasons I supported requiring daily physical activity for our elementary school students. More than ever before, our children are inundated with technology that too often provides little more than passive entertainment video games and instant messages, television and MP3 players, the Internet and cell phones with cameras. We have to be aggressive when it comes to instilling healthy habits in our children, we must be creative in our approach and most importantly, we must let children know that exercising can be more fun than staring at a computer screen all day.

One good example is Marathon Kids a free, incremental, endurance building running program for kindergartners through 5th graders founded by Kay Morris of Austin and sponsored by folks like Paul Carrozza of Run Tex and Whole Foods Market. Marathon Kids is helping more than 35,000 Central Texas children achieve a huge fitness goal, running a full marathon, in short increments over a period of 6 months. Children who participate in the program are provided
with free workbooks to keep track of their running progress and eating habits and parents are encouraged to become actively involved as well.

This year, Marathon Kids is expanding the program to Houston and Dallas and other areas may be included in the future. Marathon Kids is a great example of an innovative way communities can transform lifestyle habits at an early age because there is no better time to wage this battle than when our children are in their formative years.

And there are other resources available for communities that are striving to change the fitness culture. The OneStar Foundation a non-profit organization I established to build effective partnerships between volunteers, charitable groups and the state, currently has up to $2 million that can be used to provide human resources support for new or existing juvenile obesity programs. Through the AmeriCorps program, OneStar can put human resources into action and provide volunteers for many worthy childhood fitness programs across the state. And I encourage local community leaders to take advantage of these resources.

I care passionately about fitness because I care passionately about the health and well-being of Texans. And I want Texans of all ages to form the fitness habits that will allow them to live longer, healthier lives while saving taxpayers billions of dollars in healthcare costs associated with obesity.

The good news is it's never too late to start living healthy. Just ask Jared from Subway. I myself changed my exercise habits in my late-30's, taking up running again so I could sleep better at night and feel better during the day. Just as it is never too late to start living healthy lives, it's never too early to start helping our children make the right choices about exercise and nutrition and begin to develop the habits that will lead to a full and healthy life.

No single group of Texans is more impressionable than our children. They are our greatest hope, our most precious resource, our most important cause. The habits they learn at a young age both good and bad will stick with them for a lifetime. We must set them on the right path. And like a child learning to walk the first steps are always the most difficult. But they are also the most important.

I am proud of the first steps Texas has taken to combat childhood obesity and the debilitating conditions associated with it. I appreciate the hard work of so many of you here today and I am confident that as we continue to work together we can reverse the childhood obesity trends and ensure that every Texas child has a bright, healthy future before them.

Thank you.