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Fitness Industry Gathers on Capitol Hill Hours After Healthy CHOICES Act Is Introduced, Urging Congress to Pass Anti-Obesity, Exercise Promotion Legislation

BOSTON, MA-May 5, 2010-Within hours of the introduction of the Healthy CHOICES Act, and just days after the release of America’s first-ever National Physical Activity Plan, the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) and leaders from the fitness industry are gathering on Capitol Hill as part of the 8th Annual Summit for a Healthier America. Industry leaders will meet with Members of Congress to share their vision for a healthier future, urge Congress to address the physical and fiscal costs of physical inactivity, and advocate for passage of the Healthy CHOICES Act, which includes both the Personal Health Investment Today (PHIT) (H.R.2105) and the Workforce Health Improvement Program (WHIP) (H.R. 2106, S. 913) Acts, two exercise promotion bills that provide tax benefits for certain sports and fitness expenses.

“We commend Congressman Ron Kind and his fellow co-sponsors for introducing this precedent-setting legislation that provides a comprehensive approach to treating obesity,” says Joe Moore, IHRSA president and CEO. “With the introduction of this legislation, and the release of our country’s first-ever National Physical Activity Plan, a unifying vision for a healthier future has been laid out—a future wherein engaging in regular physical activity and healthy lifestyles can be an easy choice for all Americans. The legislation that IHRSA is promoting fits into that vision. The inclusion of PHIT and WHIP in the Healthy CHOICES Act demonstrates the importance of these bills in helping to remove financial barriers to exercise and to making regular physical activity possible for more Americans.”

The Healthy CHOICES Act is first-of-its kind legislation that provides a comprehensive approach to treating obesity, bringing together industry, government, and non-profits to address America’s obesity epidemic. The legislation establishes BMI as a "vital sign"; expands obesity treatment and preventive services and coverage of medical nutrition therapy; provides grants to promote health in underserved communities and to train health professionals and health profession students; improves and increases access to nutrition and wellness programs; improves access to and opportunity for physical activity for adults and children; improves access to nutritional information and healthy foods; realigns transportation policy to help promote healthy lifestyles; and expands research and assessment tools on obesity.

The PHIT Act creates a financial incentive for Americans to engage in physical fitness and exercise. It would allow Americans to utilize up to $1,000 annually from pre-tax health spending accounts (such as FSAs) to make expenditures related to organized individual and team sports, fitness and exercise, recreation, and other physical activities. Currently, Americans are able to utilize pre-tax accounts to pay for prescriptions, doctor visits and other expenses related to the treatment of illness and medical conditions. The PHIT Act would provide Americans with a tax
incentive to invest in preventative health care before costly treatment is necessary. The PHIT Act would not increase the total contribution limits to those pre-tax accounts.

The WHIP Act would help small businesses provide wellness benefits to their workers by correcting an inequity in the tax code. The WHIP Act not only reaffirms the right of employers to deduct the cost of providing off-site fitness center benefits to their workers, but it would also allow employees to exclude up to $900 of the off-site wellness benefit they receive from being considered taxable income. Under current tax law, businesses are permitted to deduct the cost of onsite exercise facilities and employees are not taxed on the benefit. However, if an employer provides this same benefit at an offsite facility, employees who take advantage of the benefit must pay income tax on the value of the subsidy.

The daily routine of Americans has changed dramatically over the past thirty years. Today, the average American spends half of his or her waking hours sitting. And since 1950, sedentary jobs in the United States have increased by 83 percent. Certainly, this increasing lack of movement has taken its toll. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that health care costs directly associated with inactivity were $76.6 billion in 2000, and because one in three Americans is covered by a taxpayer-funded health plan, roughly one-third of those costs—that’s $25 billion—fall directly on U.S. taxpayers.

Public health experts agree that people who maintain active, healthy lifestyles dramatically reduce their risk of developing chronic diseases, and a physically fit population results in a decrease in health care costs and improved worker productivity. According to the World Health Organization, an investment of $1 in physical activity (time and equipment) leads to $3.20 in medical cost savings.

“The health care environment has changed,” says Moore. “For years, we got sick, were prescribed medicine, and continued in the same lifestyle patterns that contributed to our getting sick in the first place. In this new age of health care, we all share in the collective cost of physical inactivity and unhealthy lifestyles. The focus must be on preserving our health from the start. Exercise and healthier lifestyles must become easier choices for all Americans. Prevention has got to become a national priority. It’s the key to securing the future health of America.”

The Campaign for a Healthier America is a national grassroots project that seeks to bring the fitness industry together with government, employers, medical and public health professionals, insurance providers, schools, and each of us individually to work as one and create a culture and environment of wellness. For more information on the Campaign for a Healthier America, visit http://www.campaign4health.org. For more information about the Workforce Health Improvement Program (WHIP) Act, go to ihrsa.org/whip and for the Personal Health Investment Today (PHIT) Act, go to ihrsa.org/phit.
About IHRSA

IHRSA is a not-for-profit trade association representing health and fitness facilities, gyms, spas, sports clubs, and suppliers worldwide. The association’s membership includes more than 9,000 clubs in 75 countries, along with over 650 industry suppliers.

IHRSA is an organizational affiliate of the National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP); a member of the advisory board of the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease (PFCD); a founding member of the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (NCPPA); a partner with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in promoting the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines; a network member of the Exercise is Medicine™ initiative; was a primary participant in the launch of the Adult Fitness Test introduced by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports; has been a partner with the HHS Office on Women’s Health in promoting National Women’s Health Week, National Women’s Check-Up Day, and the Woman Challenge; partnered with the President’s Council in 1995 on the three-year “Get Up, Get Out” public awareness campaign focusing on youth fitness; was one of the earliest proponents of the PEP legislation (Carol M. White Physical Education Program); recently introduced the publication, "The Economic Benefits of Regular Exercise"; and is the driving force behind the Campaign for a Healthier America, a national grassroots project bringing together exercise enthusiasts to make healthy lifestyles a priority for all Americans. Through its member clubs, IHRSA has offered community outreach and health promotion programs since 1986, including Commit to Get Fit, Families Involved Together, Teen Fitness Connection, I Lost It at the Club!, and Get Active America!

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