

Fattest state's lawmakers shed pounds, fried stuff

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JACKSON, Miss. – In a gym at a tiny college in the capital of the most obese state in the nation, state Rep. John Hines dropped his chest to the floor, let out an "Aaaarrrrgggh!" and forced through a few final pushups.

Hines and 71 fellow lawmakers, 19 members of the governor's staff — though not the portly governor himself — and 21 "civilians" have been working out several days a week since January to promote healthful living in a culture that prizes its sweet tea and fried food. They've shed more than 1,300 pounds collectively, giving new meaning to cutting the fat out of state government.

Hines, a 6-foot-1-inch Democrat, said he started at "well over 300 pounds," though he declined to give a specific number. The 43-year-old has dropped 73 pounds — about one-fifth of his entire weight — through the pre-dawn workouts and can now wear a suit that's been too tight for two years.

"I didn't know I had a self-esteem problem, but my self-esteem has really improved," Hines said. "My endurance is wonderful now. I feel good about myself." Lawmakers in other states have held weight-loss contests, though Mississippi's seems to be the most organized, said Joseph Nadglowski Jr., CEO of the Florida-based Obesity Action Coalition. And nowhere is there a greater need for a positive example.

Mississippi has the highest obesity rate in the nation, at 32.8 percent in 2008, the most recent figure available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Gov. Haley Barbour admits he struggles with weight and recently tried to deflect questions about a possible run for the presidency in 2012 by joking: "If you see me losing 40 pounds that means I'm either running or have cancer."

Michelle Obama came to Jackson just last month to promote her "Let's Move" program that battles childhood obesity. Lawmakers started their fitness competition at the urging of a lobbyist who shed more than 100 pounds last year.

Legislators go to Millsaps College, a private school a couple of miles north of the Capitol, to run sprints, lift weights and tackle football blocking dummies. They do mixed martial arts and jog stairs.

The 12-week workout program has drawn together participants across party, race, gender and age boundaries. It costs \$600, but participants in the legislative program aren't paying. Corporate sponsors are picking up the tab — something that's not prohibited by state ethics rules. Weekly weight-loss winners receive cash prizes that they donate to schools. The workouts change each day, and none of the exercises is for wimps.

"Pump it up! Pump it up! Keep working! Keep working," weightlifting coach Ryan Jones yelled over rock music blaring in the gym during a recent 6 a.m. session. The music was so loud that only the pulsing beat, and not the tune, could be distinguished.

As colleagues did situps and pumped weights, Rep. Mary Coleman of Jackson, a 63-year-old Democrat, stepped up onto a machine to do chinups. She hesitated a few seconds, so Ryan got in her face and yelled, "Pull up! Pull up!" "I'm trying," Coleman said, sweaty and exasperated but renewing her effort.

The main coach for the workout program is 35-year-old Paul Lacoste, who was a linebacker at Mississippi State University and briefly played pro ball. He goes to the Capitol once a week to report to each chamber how their members are doing. The leading chamber each week gets to keep a marble trophy shaped like the state of Mississippi.

"You take the fattest state in the fattest country. We're the fattest people in the world, and now our elected officials are saying, 'Enough's enough. It's time for us to make a change,'" Lacoste said. Nadglowski, with the Obesity Action Coalition, said the key for the Mississippi officials will be avoiding a return to their fried foods and sedentary habits when the 12-week program is over.

"Going on a diet and losing 40 pounds — congratulations, that's great. But if the 40 pounds returns over the next year or two, obviously that's not the kind of lifelong change we need to see," he said. Several lawmakers say they're changing their eating habits by seeking out grilled chicken and green vegetables and avoiding fried foods, red meat and desserts.

"You talk to a lot of the people who are doing this and they've changed so much about their lives," Lacoste said. "They're not going out. They're staying away from the lobbyists' liquor."

Hines, who represents the Mississippi River town of Greenville, said he hasn't touched alcohol since January. He said his mother is making fewer fried foods and more green vegetables for Sunday dinners, and his family is fully behind his new fitness plan: "My daughter said I'm getting sexier by the day."