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Center personnel participating in Scale Back Alabama initiative

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. -- More than 40 Huntsville Center employees are taking a shot at losing unwanted weight as Scale Back Alabama 2012, a statewide weight-loss contest designed to help Alabama fight obesity and to encourage participants to develop lifelong healthy habits, gets under way.

The program, now in its sixth year, has resulted in a total weight loss of nearly 760,000 pounds and healthier lifestyles for thousands of Alabamians.

According to an annual report from the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Alabama has the second highest obesity rate in the nation.

The 10-week contest is free of charge and is targeted to adults 18 and older. The program primarily focuses on the workplace and utilizes local businesses, schools and organizations as weigh-in sites.

To participate, teams of four register and have their initial weigh in at a local site during the week of Jan. 21-27. Participants who complete the contest and are on a team in which every member loses at least 10 pounds are placed in a drawing for one of three grand prizes, the top prize being \$1,000 per team member.

"Scale Back Alabama is a motivational boost for the new year for people who know they need to lose weight," said Marsha Russell, Huntsville Center's Life Center director.

Russell said this is the fourth year the Center has participated in the event. She said the Center's most successful year was 2010, when 31 Huntsville Center teams lost a collective 661 lbs.

She said many people return to participate every year and even though participants may gain back some of the weight they lost, the team concept is motivational for the four person teams.

"As a team, participants are motivated more than trying to lose weight on their own and they seem to have more success. (Losing) 10 pounds in 10 weeks is doable for just about everybody and the program has been a great success for Huntsville Center and Alabama," Russell said.

A Scale Back Alabama kick-off rally took place in Huntsville Center's Life Center on Jan. 25. Attendees were encouraged to participate in the program by guest speaker Grace Ragland who shared her story about her fight with Multiple Sclerosis and overcoming obstacles to become a world-class athlete.

Ragland is a member of Team Compaxon, a group of 10 athletes afflicted with multiple sclerosis. Compaxon, a drug used to treat MS, is the sponsor of the team comprised of 10 athletes each excelling in different sports. Ragland is a competitive mountain biker and has competed in and won many prestigious and grueling mountain bike races.

As an 18 year old college freshman, Ragland was diagnosed with MS in 1980. Although she led a physically active lifestyle before her diagnosis, she said the disease triggered a focus on her fitness and training.

“I know the benefits of being active and MS is my main competitor in life and so I’m winning the race against MS,” Ragland said.

As a member of Team Compaxon, Ragland said she has the opportunity to speak to about 20 groups a year. “I used to say if I could make a difference in one person’s life then I’ve done my job, but now I see that I’m touching many people’s lives and it’s not just people with MS, it’s people with all kinds of challenges, such as losing weight.”

Ragland said a team’s success in a program like Scale Back Alabama depends on an individual approach.

“People have to set some goals, find what motivates them and keep their eyes on the prize.”