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University of Oklahoma president makes diabetes research request

By Althea Peterson
Transcript Staff Writer

When University of Oklahoma President David Boren learned he had Type 2 diabetes after being hospitalized last summer, he immediately took action.

However, it wasn't just about diet and exercise, which led him to lose 65 pounds. It was about taking action with the state of Oklahoma by promoting research and awareness. "Unfortunately, we are number one in the nation per capita with diabetes," Boren said. "Diet and exercise can help control this, but awareness early on helps even more."

With Boren's encouragement, Oklahoma State Senator Cal Hobson, D-Lex-

ington, took bill 1056 to the Senate, co-authored with Oklahoma State Senator Glenn Coffee, R-Oklahoma City. It passed the Senate in February and is now in the House's Appropriations and Budget committee. It will likely go through the House this coming week.

"President Boren brought it to my attention that Oklahoma leads the nation in diabetes challenges, but also the affect that it has on minorities, namely Native Americans," Hobson said. "We already have some of the best researchers in the world, now we just need the facilities."

The proposed facilities will be associated with OU, both on the Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City and the OU-Tulsa campus. While this bill does not set

aside money for this project, the centers would likely come from both private donations and public funds, said Rep. Thad Balkman, R-Norman.

"This is an area that there really isn't a center for excellence in research," Balkman said. "Plus, the Health Sciences Center is a special place. You have all kinds of medical research there. The idea of a diabetes center is a natural fit."

According to the American Diabetes Association, 20.8 million, or 7 percent of



Boren

the U.S. population, have diabetes. While around 14.6 million, or 70 percent, of these people have been diagnosed, 6.2 million are undiagnosed. However, Native Americans are at a higher risk than other groups of people, with 12.8 percent diagnosed the disease. Overall, Native Americans are 2.2 times more likely to have diabetes than Caucasians.

"This has the opportunity to be the pre-eminent diabetes research center in the country," Coffee said. "It can have a billion dollar impact on the state, as well as advance research for a disease that affects so many Oklahomans."

Gregory Pyle, chief of the Choctaw Nation, said this bill is especially important with a funding loss to the National Diabetes

Education Program. "The Choctaw Nation has been honored to work with OU over the past several years on diabetes research and we are very supportive of their current endeavor," Pyle said.

Hobson agrees it is important to have collaborative involvement. "We hope to arrange direct treatment at various Indian hospitals, staffed with health sciences physicians," Hobson said.

Boren said despite his lack of diabetes awareness early on, he hopes his changed lifestyle encourages other Oklahomans. "I've probably been a bad example," Boren said. "But I hope I've turned into a good example."

Althea Peterson
366-3539

apeterson@normantranscript.com