

This Wednesday was National Girls and Women in Sports Day, and I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the enormous health benefits, both physical and mental, that girls and women gain from participation in sports. From combating obesity, to preventing heart disease, to promoting mental health, regular physical activity has an undeniably positive effect on the health status of girls and women. We need to make an investment in the public health by ensuring that regardless of age or socioeconomic background, girls and women are afforded the opportunities they need to engage in physical activity, whether in school, or their communities.

Currently in the United States, two thirds of adults and nearly one-third of children are overweight or obese. Research has demonstrated that women are more likely to be overweight than men. Overweight or obese individuals are far more likely to develop diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension. In 2000 alone, the medical costs associated with obesity, both direct and indirect totaled \$117 billion.

Promoting regular physical activity is imperative if we are going to combat this country's obesity epidemic, and improve the overall public health. A recent survey by the Centers for Disease Control revealed "61% of girls aged 9-13 did not engage in any organized physical activity outside of school, and 26% reported no free-time physical activity, classifying themselves as sedentary outside of school."

Additionally, less than 50% of American adults engage in the minimum level of physical activity required to provide any health benefits, and generally, girls and women are less physically active than boys and men. States with the highest levels of physical inactivity are also states with the highest levels of obesity. Despite this plethora of data tying a lack of physical activity to obesity and health problems, fewer and fewer schools are offering recess and physical education programs.

As an example of how we can do better, girls make up half of the high school population, yet receive only 41% of all athletic participation opportunities. This translates to 1.3 million fewer opportunities for young women to play high school sports than young men. Worse still, this gap is actually increasing.

I have introduced [H.R. 2882, the High School Athletics and Accountability Act](#) , which would

require that high schools report basic data on the number of female and male students participating in their athletics programs and the expenditures made for their sports teams.

While Federal law requires colleges to make gender equity in sports information publicly available each year, high schools are not required to disclose this data, making it difficult to ensure fairness in athletic programs.

Better information can help high schools and parents of schoolchildren foster fairness in athletic opportunities for all girls and boys. Ensuring equal access to athletics for young women in school is just one of the many ways we can encourage a lifetime of exercise. We must work together to guarantee that women across the country are able to engage in a level of physical activity that can keep them healthy.

Given the prominent role health care has played in the national discourse the past year, it is imperative that we do not let this day come and go without a public discussion about the part that physical activity and sports can play in keeping girls and women healthy.

You can learn more in [the Women's Sports Foundation's report "Her Life Depends On It II" \(PDF\)](#).