

Remarks by PHA Board Chair James R. Gavin III, M.D., Ph.D., as Prepared for Delivery:

Good morning. My name is Dr. James Gavin and I am Chairman of the Board for the Partnership for a Healthier America – an organization created to work with the private sector to help solve the nation’s childhood obesity crisis.

At the Partnership, we often talk about making the healthy choice the easy choice: from working with grocers to bring healthy, affordable food into areas that lack access; to working with day care centers that are ensuring that children are starting out their lives with the nutrition and physical activity they need.

It’s critical that we involve the private sector as we seek to lower the barriers – both real and perceived – to making the healthy choice. But it may surprise you that when we talk about making ‘the healthy choice the easy choice’ the operative word isn’t “healthy.” It’s really about “choice.”

We must work to make as many healthy options available as we can, but it is important that we remember that the choice to be occasionally indulgent is a privilege that should be preserved. In the past, we have excelled at the occasional indulgence, but lagged on the creation of healthier choices, and now I am pleased that we are beginning to take steps to close that gap.

Darden Restaurants, the world’s largest full service restaurant company, owns and operates 1,900 restaurants in 49 states. Darden’s brands include some of the most-visited restaurants in the country: Red Lobster, Olive Garden, LongHorn Steakhouse, and Bahama Breeze, among others.

Perhaps most importantly, Darden serves over 400 million meals per year. That’s a lot of people, especially families with children, making a lot of choices.

And it is with Darden’s expansive reach in mind, that we are excited to announce their meaningful commitment to ending childhood obesity.

This commitment, we should note, carries far more than the weight of the words they announce here today. Darden has volunteered to sign a binding, legal agreement with the Partnership that these commitments we provide here today will be kept. And it will be the Partnership’s role to help monitor compliance.

Not every company is ready to make this level of commitment voluntarily. We all know, it’s one thing to make a public statement of commitment, but something entirely different to sign a document promising to fulfill that obligation, and I am pleased to announce that Darden has done just that. You see, we will only solve this obesity crisis one commitment for change at a time.

They have signed a promise that says, “We know how important this is and we will see it done. No rhetoric. No excuses.”

And they deserve all of our commendations for that.

So by July 2012, in every Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Longhorn Steakhouse, Darden will ensure that the default side for all children’s menu items is a fruit or a vegetable. Every default item. Every time.

One percent white milk will be the default beverage and will be provided automatically when no other beverage is ordered. Milk will be prominently promoted on the menu and made available with free refills. Carbonated beverages will not be displayed anywhere on a children’s menu.

Also, Darden has reaffirmed its commitment to continue its practice of not marketing to children under twelve through digital or television media.

In a moment, Clarence Otis, Darden’s CEO, will share the details of the rest of Darden’s commitment with you. But let me say that from children’s menus to adult menus, this is a massive commitment. And it’s one that will positively impact millions of families by offering greater choice and variety in healthier menu options.

An incredible commitment, to be sure -- it’s also a necessary one.

Recent studies predict half of all Americans will be obese by 2030. Half. That’s every other person who walks into an office building, grocery store, or corner bodega.

Every other kid who walks into a classroom. That’s right, Obese.

The current generation of children is on track to be the first that will be sicker and live shorter lives than the generation before it.

The clarion call for change is as clear as it’s ever been.

Do we believe that by ensuring vegetables as a default side dish that we can solve that problem all at once, today? Or reducing calories? Or by prominently displaying milk on menus? No. There is no single answer to this crisis. It’s one commitment for change at a time.

Indeed, the First Lady’s passionate commitment to this issue and Darden’s leadership on display here brings us that much closer to our goals. The Partnership for a Healthier America is proud to stand with both of them today as we move past rhetoric toward action. Past the problem and toward a solution.

The fight certainly does not end today, but we have picked up an important ally.

And now it’s my privilege to introduce that ally – lead by the man making these healthier options a reality.

Please welcome Darden Restaurants' CEO, Clarence Otis.