The challenge in on, Hamilton County.

For the fifth consecutive year, local sponsors have created some extra incentive for area residents who would like to lose some weight and start living a healthier lifestyle. The payoff for the two-person team that can lose the highest percentage of combined body weight -- $500 cash.

A competition launched in 2009 is back again in 2013, set to kick off with weigh-ins in early March. Approximately 100 days later, during the A'ROR'N Days celebration, winners will be announced based on percentage of weight loss.

"Several members of the community have had great success and are now living a healthier lifestyle after being part of the health challenge," said Brad Bangs, director of rehabilitation services at Memorial Community Health Inc. "We are excited to be bringing the challenge back this year to help promote healthier lifestyles, and to give people an opportunity to live a healthier life."

The competition will feature two-person teams, each of which will be invited to submit a health challenge name. A prize of $100 will go to the team judged to have the most creative name.

On Saturday, June 22, winners will be announced at the A'ROR'N Days Fun Run, with $500 cash awarded to the first place team, $300 for second and $200 for third.

In addition, eight teams will be awarded two-month memberships at either the Aurora Fitness Center or Jazzercise, two of this year's sponsors. The drawings for those prizes will be held after the weigh-ins March 7 and 11, which will be open to participants from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. each of those days at the MCHI Physical Therapy Clinic on 5th and O Streets.

"We have restructured the prizes so they will be able to benefit from Jazzercise and Aurora Fitness during the competition," Bangs explained. "We are hoping to have even more teams involved this year."

The entry fee is $5 per person, reduced from $10 last year.

This year's competition will be based on teams that lose the greatest percentage of weight during the 100-day event. In earlier years, the health challenge recognized winners based on percentage of body fat lost, or actual pounds lost.

"We are doing the percentage of weight loss again this year to make it more competitive for people of all fitness levels and body sizes to compete," Bangs noted. "The health challenge committee wanted to encourage those who do not need to lose a significant amount of weight to be involved as well."

The 2011 challenge drew 53 four-person teams, which lost a combined 1,100 pounds. Last year, 64 two-person teams competed, though many did not complete the final weigh in. No final figures were available.

The timing of this year's challenge was given considerable thought as well. Rather than a shorter competition, the committee decided to extend it over a longer period, hoping participants would benefit more than just experiencing short-term weight loss.

"The competition is over 100 days to help people adopt lifestyles they will maintain for a lifetime," Bangs said. "We also recognize the benefit of having a partner to help you reach your fitness goals and we wish all the teams good luck in this year's challenge."

An in-depth study conducted recently by the Central District Health Department concluded that weight gain is among the greatest health concerns for people of all ages in Hamilton, Hall and Merrick counties. At the national level, 58 percent of adults are considered obese, and the

CDHD reported that all three area counties are higher still.
That study, combined with feedback from previous years' participants, convinced the planning committee to lay down the challenge for another year.
"Memorial Community Health's mission statement is 'Improving lives through community health services,'" Bangs noted. "The health challenge is one way we can help support our community to overcome health issues related to obesity and promote living a healthy lifestyle. Everyone who can take away one or two things from the health challenge that they change in their life to be healthier, will be winners."
Those planning to enter this year's challenge need not pre-register. Watch for additional information on the weigh-ins March 11 and 14.
The 2013 Health Challenge sponsors include MCHI, the Aurora News-Register, Jazzercise, the Aurora Fitness Center, Aurora Mall, Jim's U-Save Pharmacy and Pinnacle Bank.