

Workplace wellness

The benefits of implementing a wellness plan

The buzz around worksite wellness programs continues to grow — and with good reason. More and more employers are looking to incorporate health promotion and disease prevention into their business strategy and culture. These companies are seeing the link between a healthy work force and a healthy bottom line.

The shift that's occurring, according to Wendy Wigger, director of wellness for Priority Health, a Michigan-based health insurance plan, is a move from focusing solely on the cost of health care to looking at the bigger picture of the total investment and value of health. Many employers are seeking to better understand not just their costs. They're also identifying some of the key drivers to their health care costs and the impact that can be made on them. They're focused not only on the 20 percent of their employees who may be driving 80 percent of their health care costs, but they're also focused on keeping the 80 percent of their "healthy employees" healthy.

Smart Business spoke with Wigger about the benefits a company can reap by implementing a workplace wellness plan.

Does wellness really work?

The cost benefit of worksite wellness has been well documented over the past two decades. For example, according to the *American Journal of Health Promotion* in a review of 73 published studies of worksite health promotion programs, there was an average \$3.50-to-\$1 savings-to-cost ratio in reduced absenteeism and health care costs. And, based on work conducted by Larry Chapman in a meta-review of 42 published studies of worksite health promotion programs, there was an average 28 percent reduction in sick-leave absenteeism, 26 percent reduction in health costs, 30 percent reduction in workers' compensation and disability management claims costs and a \$5.93-to-\$1 savings-to-cost ratio.

If we're going to be successful in affecting overall rising health care costs and health outcomes, we need to focus on the



Wendy Wigger
Director of wellness
Priority Health

root cause of disease — and that's our unhealthy lifestyle behaviors. Wellness is a key prevention strategy designed to impact the health and cost equation.

What lifestyle choices have the most impact on health care costs and why?

Evidence points to the fact that more than half of all health care costs are attributable to lifestyle behaviors — factors we can control to a significant degree. In fact, 33 percent of United States deaths per year can be attributed to tobacco use, physical inactivity and poor eating habits.

The number and type of health risks an individual has can greatly amplify his or her overall health care costs. Smoking, lack of exercise and obesity are the three greatest modifiable lifestyle behaviors that drive increased health care costs. These particular lifestyle behaviors are associated with increased risks for cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancers, diabetes and other diseases. Beyond the increased health care costs, there's also the impact on employee productivity in the workplace, work limitations, absenteeism, the level of engagement in work, as well as the individual's overall quality of life.

What tangible steps can employers take to support their employees in making healthier choices?

Core components of an effective wellness program rely on education, behavior change interventions, and strategies for creating supportive and healthy work environments. The primary goal of such programs is to positively influence health behaviors, reduce health risks and optimize health and productivity. In addition, there's also the economic goal of lowering or helping to manage long-term health-related costs.

While an effective worksite wellness program will vary based on the needs and environment of the organization, there are common elements. First, you must begin with a solid benchmark of the health of your employees and your company's commitment to health and wellness. Second, develop an evaluation system to measure program impact and outcomes. Third, include health education programs that provide employees with the information and skills to change their lifestyle behaviors. Fourth, consider health screens, including a health risk appraisal that can help employees assess their current health risks and set the stage for focused health improvement. Fifth, create a healthy work culture to reinforce and support sustainable lifestyle behavior changes. Sixth, build wellness as a business strategy to fully integrate your health promotion programming efforts into your organization's overall values, mission and vision. Finally, create linkages between your wellness efforts and other employee support services, such as benefits, employee assistant programs and work-life balances to optimize the value and results from each program. Following these results, you can achieve better health for your employees and a healthier bottom line for your business.

WENDY WIGGER is the director of wellness for Priority Health, a Michigan-based health insurance plan. Reach her at (616) 464-8758.

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