



State Workplace Wellness Initiatives

By Madeline Kriescher

The consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle and chronic disease are far-reaching.

"Epidemic" is defined by Merriam-Webster as a condition that "affects or tends to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time." Sadly, Americans are faced with a new epidemic—poor diet and lack of physical activity—that contributes to thousands of deaths every year. Obesity and inactivity are precursors to a panoply of serious health problems and chronic conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, depression and high blood pressure. These health conditions appear not only in adults, but also are affecting children at an alarming rate. Almost one-third of all children between the ages of 6 and 19 are considered overweight or at risk for being overweight. According to the Institute of Medicine, 9 million children over age 6 are obese, and there is a 70 percent chance that an overweight adolescent will be overweight or obese as an adult.

The consequences for Americans of living an unhealthy lifestyle and battling chronic disease are far-reaching. A Brigham Young University study of absenteeism rates of 10,825 employed adults found that obese employees tend to be absent from work due to illness substantially more often than their slimmer counterparts. Obese employees were more than 1.5 times more likely to experience high and moderate levels of absenteeism, respectively, than were lean individuals.

State Action

According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, chronic disease is now the principal cause of disability and use of health services and accounts for 78 percent of U.S. health expenditures. State budgets are affected by these higher medical costs. In 2003, more than \$75 billion was spent on obesity-related medical expenses in the 50 states. More than half of that amount is paid for by taxpayers through Medicare and Medicaid.

To address the growing threat to America's future health and economy, state legislatures are acting to respond to childhood and adult obesity, encourage healthy behavior, and provide choices for healthy eating and active living. Improved wellness in the workplace means fewer sick days, higher productivity, and, potentially, lower health insurance costs for both employees and employers.

States can effectively promote employee health by developing a comprehensive wellness program. Arkansas, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia currently offer wellness programs for state employees that include personal risk assessments, lifestyle education incentives, and health management strategies. Integral to any workplace wellness program are opportunities and incentives for employees to incorporate healthy choices, good nutrition, and physical activity into their daily lives. Kentucky, Michigan, New Mexico and West Virginia have state-sponsored walking programs, some of which include statewide challenges, special events and designated walking trails.

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Workplaces also can design health benefits packages to encourage disease prevention and management. Some states have chosen to reward participation in healthy lifestyle practices, such as health risk assessments, tobacco cessation programs, or fitness facility use. South Dakota state employees who participate in a health risk assessment or attain personal health goals can receive a cash prize. The Utah Work Well Program allows state workers time during work hours to exercise. Vermont supports its state workers with worksite wellness awards. Delaware's DelaWELL program focuses on state employees who can modify risk factors and helps them make long-term behavior changes. The program offers health risk assessments, personalized lifestyle and disease management coaching, online health resources, health education centers and wellness incentives.

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Collaboration is a key to workplace wellness program success. In South Dakota, Governor Mike Rounds and the State Employee Health Plan worked with the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks and the Department of Education and Social Services to create the Healthy South Dakota Wellness Program. It has helped workplaces lower health care costs, reduce absenteeism, reduce worker compensation and disability claims, and increase morale and loyalty. The program has expanded to include private employers.

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States can further efforts to create healthy workplaces and support healthy choices by forming coalitions and advisory groups among the public and private sectors. Arizona created the State Employees Wellness Advisory Council, which is identifying community partnerships and state agency resources that can create or improve wellness programs for state employees and their families. Among other things, the council will identify models and opportunities for onsite wellness programs and provide feedback for state agency health and fitness programs. Agencies and individual employees will be recognized for promoting and participating in these initiatives and programs.

Federal Action

National goals mirror the state goals—to promote wellness and to help people make healthier choices. Healthy People 2010 is a statement of national health objectives designed to identify the most significant preventable threats to health and to establish national goals to reduce these threats. Objectives—which include increasing daily physical activity, preventing chronic disease, reducing tobacco use and combating obesity—reflect some of the major U.S. public health concerns.

National goals are to promote wellness and help people make healthier choices.

Today's workers spend nearly half their waking hours on the job. By providing supportive environments and incentives for healthy living, policy leaders can make great strides to promote workplace wellness that can lead to fewer sick days, greater worker productivity, and lower health insurance costs.

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