

Workplace Wellness

Issue

Lost productivity and absenteeism due to illness and injuries affect the bottom line of companies. They also contribute to an employer's health care costs. One way that West Virginia businesses – large and small – could help alleviate these situations and obtain tangible, long-term benefits would be to implement or expand workplace wellness programs. West Virginia's businesses provide current worksite wellness efforts that are among some of the best in the nation, but more needs to be done by more employers – large and small.

Background

Most employers will spend anywhere from \$2,500 to \$5,000 per employee, per year on healthcare delivery. And these costs are escalating rapidly each year. Compounding this situation is the fact that over the next ten years, the nation's working population will be getting older...rapidly. In fact, throughout the rest of the decade, one baby boomer will turn 50 every eight seconds. And, because of this phenomenon, healthcare costs will rise even more. Wellness education, prevention and early intervention will be paramount in keeping these health care costs under control and in keeping nation's workforce healthy, functional, and productive.

Smart businesses in West Virginia are recognizing that a healthy workforce is a productive workforce, and they know that with healthier workers absenteeism declines, health benefit costs are lowered, and worker satisfaction, recruitment and retention increases. In response, a number of employers have established worksite wellness programs not only to improve the health and wellness of their employee populations, but also to get a good return-on-investment. According to information from the Wellness Council of America, the average ROI of a workplace wellness program is somewhere around \$3 for every \$1 invested.

“At the most elementary level, if you take the \$100 or \$150 figure, you can expect a \$300 to \$450 savings per employee, per year. While \$150 per employee, per year, may sound like a lot, it needs to be seen as an investment—not as an expense. If you build your program properly, your return on investment should be about 3:1. Also, if you don't invest this amount, you run the risk of not allocating the appropriate resources to bring about behavior change.”

West Virginia needs to do more to expand workplace wellness programs to many more small employers and needs to explore policy ideas that would provide added financial incentives for those who participate, such as reduced health insurance premiums or tax incentives.

The Chamber's Position

The West Virginia Chamber of Commerce advocates the development of a worksite wellness initiative in West Virginia that would involve the creation of a new statewide wellness network of business groups and

certified “wellness” health centers and clinics. This network of local health care providers would:

- Work with local employers to:
 - o conduct and analyze employee health risk assessments,
 - o offer health counseling, fitness and nutrition services and
 - o provide ongoing program support and facilitation.
- Work with at-risk employees to create specialized intervention programs to help them migrate to low-risk status. These may involve setting up contractual relationships with reputable vendors to provide at-risk employees with personalized services through means such as telephonic counseling.
- The network also would work to expand workplace wellness by communicating and encourage more individual businesses to offer worksite wellness programs that may include:
 - Providing incentives, rewards to employees who participate in wellness activities (such as paying a portion of a health club/Y membership fee);
 - Distributing educational materials or brochures on nutrition and wellness;
 - Inviting a local doctor or nurse to come in periodically to discuss wellness and nutrition;
 - Creating or subscribing to a “health coach advice line”;
 - Encouraging walking or physical activity, including possibly allowing this during working hours;
 - Stocking vending machines with low-fat or healthy options or have fresh fruits available at lunch areas;
 - Organizing and hosting on-site health fairs or health assessment/screening sessions;
 - Establishing a smoking cessation program; and
 - Educating workers to the true costs of health care and encouraging personal behavioral changes.

The West Virginia Chamber and this network would work to create added financial rewards to those businesses that participate in this workplace wellness initiative. These may include working with insurance carriers (workers’ comp and health) to examine the creation of discounts for employers who participate in this new program and working with state leaders to examine the benefits of providing state tax rebates for those offering employee health promotion programs that meet certain criteria.

Another worksite wellness strategy that should be explored as part of the initiative would be to examine ways to link health promotion to a company’s benefit plan design. Some companies have gone as far as to require employees to participate in a company’s worksite wellness and health risk assessment program in order to maintain in health insurance plan.