

# what's working

“biggest loser”  
is a big winner

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

**A**lbert Marino had no idea what he was getting into a few years ago when he headed off to a weight-loss and fitness camp offered by his health care plan's wellness program.

The camp facility is affiliated with the television program “The Biggest Loser,” and co-workers teased him about how hard it was going to be. Marino, 48, was a bit overweight at the time but hadn't necessarily been looking to make any changes.

As a maintenance department employee for the Town of Orchard Park, a Buffalo, New York suburb, Marino is a member of the Labor-Management Healthcare Fund (LMHF) in Erie County. The fund insures 33,000 lives and provides health care for employees of ten Erie County municipalities and government agencies, including the Erie County government.

LMHF started offering wellness benefits more than a decade ago, beginning with incentives for members to get annual physicals and health screenings. Now, in addition to the weight-loss camp, the program includes fitness classes and exercise equipment at many worksites, worksite bicycles and healthy cooking classes. Erie County also has completed both ergonomics training for all employees and an ergonomics study and is experimenting with stand-up work stations.

The fund annually spends about \$300,000 on wellness programming.

The chance to attend the week-long camp at the Biggest Loser Resort Niagara in nearby Java, New York is one of the wellness program's most successful features, said Joseph Murphy, a member of the LMHF board of trustees. Murphy is principal executive assistant-personnel for Erie County. The fund annually sends about 75 plan members to the camp.

Marino described long runs, including a grueling hill climb while carrying one of the trainers on his back, in addition to observing a strict diet while he was at the camp. But he also learned about stress management, meditation and nutrition and heard testimonials from others who have struggled with weight and health issues.

The biggest lesson: “Probably, thinking of food as fuel and thinking about the type of food I eat,” he said. “They focus on high protein, some carbohydrates, certainly greens. Ultimately, you do feel better. You absolutely feel better when you don't have that excess weight.”

Marino lost about eight pounds during the retreat and about 26 pounds overall. Although it has been a few years since he attended, he has stuck with many aspects of the lifestyle changes and said he'd repeat the experience if he had the chance.

“It's not just about the weight loss and eating healthy. It's a little bit about teamwork and trusting in others and building some relationships and getting to know yourself,” he said.

Between 400 and 500 people have attended the camp since the fund started offering it five or six years ago, Murphy said. “We've had people who have come back after being there and over a course of time have lost up to 100 pounds,” he said. “We've had people come off their statins for cholesterol; we've had people come off their high blood pressure medication. We do see results.”

The fund covers all of the costs of attending the fitness camp. Employees must use personal time off to attend.

Participants sign up in advance and are selected through a lottery. The fund struggled to fill the first couple of camps until the word spread. Now, the number of willing participants exceeds available spots.



Joseph Murphy  
Trustee  
Labor-Management  
Healthcare Fund  
Buffalo, New York



John W. Greenan  
Chairman,  
Board of Trustees  
Labor-Management  
Healthcare Fund  
Buffalo, New York

Building on the success of the fitness and weight-loss camps, LMHF recently has added a three-day stress-management program for workers in high-stress positions such as law enforcement and child protective services.

Murphy and another trustee, John W. Greenan, learned the Biggest Loser facility was offering programs that deal with posttraumatic stress disorder to military veterans. Finding a way to address stress had been on the trustees' minds.

Behind musculoskeletal issues, stress is the fund's second biggest health care cost driver, Murphy said. That's followed by diabetes, which is interrelated with stress, he said. About 75% of participants also have sleep issues.

"We know stress management is something that's extremely important to overall health. It's such a large driver when you think of disease states and use of medications," said Greenan, who is chief of administrative services for the Erie County Sheriff's Office and chairman of the LMHF board of trustees.

The county's child protective service workers have been under a lot of stress in the last few years as several children died. "There was a huge spotlight on those people, and turnover was through the roof," Murphy said. "When we finally got back to full staff, we said we've got to do something to give these people the tools they need to handle the stress."

Violent incidents involving police across the country over the summer added to stress among employees who worked in law enforcement, making a stress management program even more timely, Murphy and Greenan said.

Since last fall, 100 people, including 911 dispatchers, law enforcement personnel and social workers, have attended a three-day stress-management retreat. "I think the biggest eyeopener was to find out that they're not alone," Murphy said.

Participants formed bonds during the program and have a support network they can access after they return to the job, Greenan said.

Even though many of the police departments had peer programs or a department counselor, officers may have shied away from using these programs because they didn't want to be known as "the person seeing the counselor" or were afraid the information would get back to their employer, he said.

Sharon Rochelle, Erie County deputy social services commissioner, attended the first stress camp last fall and

has used some of the stress management techniques she learned, including aromatherapy at home in the evenings and occasional stress breaks while she's at work. She also bought a Fitbit to remind her to get up from her desk periodically and move.

"They're little things, but it's what I can fit into my day right now. If I hadn't learned some of those strategies, I would have never thought about doing them on my own," she said. Those little things have had an impact, Rochelle believes. "I'm able to handle the stress better and I definitely feel calmer," she said.

Rochelle was surprised to find out she had so much in common with the others who attended, including sheriff's deputies, youth detention workers and probation officers. Through team-building exercises, chats around a bonfire and other activities, "we really felt like we had built a camaraderie with each other."

The stress program will be on hold during the winter, but LMHF plans to send a group every two weeks for at least ten weeks, beginning in April, and put about 300 people through the program.

Trustees are seeking additional funding for the program through the fund's health insurers and grants.

Murphy said he is confident LMHF can continue to fund the weight-loss and stress programs. The weight-loss program "has been so successful there's no way we're walking away from that," he said.

It's difficult to put an exact dollar amount on the impact the wellness program may have had on health costs, Murphy said. "It's really speculative; however, if we're spending \$100,000 a year on this particular program and it prevents one heart attack or one stroke—because we're experienced—it's dollar for dollar saved," he said.

"We've had people who have lost scores of pounds, let alone people who have lost 100 pounds," he said. "We know that we've significantly changed their lifestyles, and you can't put a dollar value on it."

LMHF's health premiums have increased annually at about 5% compared with 9% increases in the area, Murphy said. "We have managed to stay well under the trend of the community," he said. "We like to think it's because of the way we manage the entire fund but also because of the wellness program."

