

what's working

coaching employees
toward better health

by | **Teri Dougherty**

Whether they want to kick a lifelong smoking habit or simply have more energy at the end of the day, a wellness program for the employees of the city of McAllen, Texas is designed to address a wide range of goals and needs.

The availability of an on-site wellness coach and the comprehensive design of the year-old program are big factors in the program's early success, said Jolee Perez, the city's director of employee benefits. "I've never seen a program so clearly designed for everyone—those who are ready for huge life changes and those who can only commit to a single small step."

City employees Joe Ortega, custodian crew leader at the McAllen Public Library, and Angel Elizondo, who works in the IT department, say the wellness program has helped them reach their goals.

Ortega was a longtime smoker and had low energy and high stress when curiosity about the new wellness program motivated him to attend a nutrition class back in 2016. After attending the class, he opted to enroll in the fitness program too.

More than a year later, Ortega has the results to show for his participation in the program. "I feel good. My two main goals for joining were to stop smoking and become more flexible. When I turned 63, I started to feel the aches and pains of old age. Thanks to (wellness) Coach Curiel and the wellness program, I have met both my goals," Ortega shared. He's been smoke-free for more than a year and is maintaining a healthy weight.

Elizondo, 32, wanted to fight the effects of his sedentary work environment and, more importantly, gain energy and strength and lose weight. He hasn't missed a single workout since he started in October of 2016. His muscle percentage has increased 5%, and he has lost seven inches from his belly and six inches from his hips. "Everyone wants to know Angel's secret," Perez said.

In 2015, Curiel was hired to become the full-time wellness coach and help design the new wellness program for city employees and their dependents. The ENERGY wellness program was launched in July 2016 using the principles of education, nutrition, exercise, recovery, growth and yearly (a long-term outlook). The goals of ENERGY are specific: to reduce health claims expenses and workers' compensation claims expenses and to boost worker productivity and morale.

McAllen, situated almost on the southern tip of Texas, may have been facing an uphill battle, given the community's culture and socioeconomic levels. It has been known as one of the nation's most obese cities, most recently named by WalletHub as one of "2017's fattest cities in America."

However, Perez said the city is making big strides to get off the obesity list with various programs designed to instill fitness habits in McAllen children and adults. It has been recognized for its efforts to reduce childhood obesity, with honors including being named a Five-Star Gold medalist for the Let's Move! Cities, Towns and Counties initiative launched by former first lady Michelle Obama and an All-Star in that program by the National League of Cities.

The city provides benefits to 3,846 employees and dependents, including 1,933 city workers (part and full-time), 160 workers employed by various city agencies such as the Chamber of Commerce and McAllen Housing Authority, and 200 retirees. The wellness program is open to all employees even if they are not enrolled in the health plan.

The first step to participating is to complete the wellness onboarding process, which includes a health survey to gain an understanding of where the participant is, or has been, on their health and wellness journey and where they want to go. It also takes into consideration risks for heart disease,



Jolee Perez
Director of Employee Benefits
City of McAllen, Texas



Rafael Curiel
Wellness Coach
City of McAllen, Texas



City of McAllen, Texas workers participate in a foam rolling session to learn how to prevent back injuries and heal musculoskeletal issues.

stroke, etc. Participants meet with Curiel to be measured for 12 body composition components such as belly circumference, body mass index (BMI) and perceived fitness level. Curiel, who is a certified trainer, helps workers identify their personal wellness goals in intervals of three, six, nine and 12 months.

“Coach Curiel is focused on helping our bodies with their ability to function both now and as we age. He starts with education and safety, welcoming city employees at their current fitness level, and gently helps move them along their journey,” Perez shared. “He touches everyone’s file at least once every three months, watching out for those who may get discouraged.”

The availability of an on-site wellness coach makes the program special, Perez said. “Very few employers are lucky enough to have their own on-site wellness coach, and our coach is one that has far surpassed the expectations we had when we first set out to create this program.”

In addition to the one-on-one coaching sessions, ENERGY program services include:

- Diabetes Health Plan—where copays/coinsurance for care are waived for health plan members with diabetes, cholesterol or blood pressure issues to remove the financial burden of caring for chronic conditions. Doing so helps prevent episodes of catastrophic care.

- Group and personal fitness and online training (both on and off the clock)
- Nutrition and cooking classes, including meal plans
- Education—many ongoing courses including newly offered courses on diabetes care
- Real Appeal Weight Loss program—a no-cost program that offers participants a blender, food scale and helpful tools at no cost as well as virtual coaching for 12 months
- WellNexus partnership program with local vendors.

Employees who participate receive points for each activity they complete. They can then spend those credits in the program’s wellness store to buy items such as kitchen gadgets, fitness equipment, T-shirts and more.

A wellness committee, which is a volunteer group representing different city departments, contributes to the development and inspiration of the program. The committee is instrumental in marketing wellness activities as well as providing feedback, especially from departments that are difficult to reach because of their work environment, hours of activity and location, Perez said.

Wellness is not only being driven from the top down but also at the department level through a grant program. Departments are encouraged to apply for grants of up to \$500 to help execute their own wellness competition, program or idea. One grant has already been approved, and the project is under way. Additional applications include funding for stand-up desks and mini-bicycle-pedal systems to be used under employees’ desks. Curiel helps inspire such ideas because he uses a stand-up desk.

The focus on health and wellness throughout the city is more than nutrition and fitness. The city supports social events by, for example, hosting a bowling tournament, understanding that such events not only foster teamwork but also are a great release of the day’s stress. The city, through the HR training division, also recently started a low-ropes challenge course to foster the ability to work with teams, improve communication and listening skills, and support everyday problem solving. Any wellness-focused events are promoted and supported by the wellness program and Curiel.

To boost participation, the wellness commission is engaging city workers on all fronts—embracing technology through a wellness website, YouTube channels and Facebook Live as well as communicating through e-mail, newsletters and *Loo Leaflets* (individual bathroom-stall newsletters).

Curriel runs 20-minute Facebook Live sessions from 12:20 p.m. to 12:40 p.m. on Fridays on a wide variety of health and fitness topics. The videos are stored so workers can watch them when their schedules allow.

The program also has begun work on a long-term goal to establish the WellNexus program, which is a wide network of partnerships with local vendors that offer a variety of services including discounts, contributions to the city's wellness store, education and/or lunch-and-learn sessions for city employees. Partnering vendors display the WellNexus logo on their windows to advertise their partnership with the city. A WellNexus app is planned but, in the meantime, all wellness partners are listed on the city's wellness website.

Perez and her team are tracking results and know what's working and what isn't. The city's wellness division produces detailed quarterly reports reflecting engagement by age, gender and department, helping planners to identify trends of participation over a period of time.

For example, the first ENERGY exercise session was hosted at a local facility and offered three mornings each week (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) on and off the work clock. To increase accessibility, the program began offering another session in the evenings at a different location. The long-term goal is to include many different locations and time frames to accommodate as many employees and their dependents as possible.

The exercise sessions are free for all participants. The wellness commission removed the \$10 fee that was originally charged after two free months. "We want participants to join in whenever they have time and are feeling well enough to do so, without worrying if they were paying for something they wouldn't use," Perez explained. As of July 31, a total of 950 sessions have been taken by all participants, and nearly 570,000 calories have been burned since group training began just one year ago.

Quarterly wellness reports also include health plan statistics such as percentage of members using medical benefits and costs of claims broken down by medical and pharmacy divisions paid by the city through self-funding. The well-

ness division is watching the cost per employee per month (PEPM) based on expenses of the health plan. The goal is to decrease PEPM over time as more workers participate in the program.

From the launch in July 2016 through the end of the second quarter of 2017, 241 current city employees from 40 of 55 total departments have completed the wellness onboarding process and continue to be actively engaged in the wellness program.

"Overall, we are seeing a cultural shift within the employee population that is centralized around getting to know what our program has for the individual person and how they can take the first of many steps toward a healthier and happy lifestyle," Perez said.



City employee Angel Elizondo works out as wellness coach Rafael Curriel looks on. Elizondo has seen impressive results since he started working out through the city's wellness program.

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