

what's working

building wellness program
participation and engagement



Lisa Henke, CEBS
Risk/Benefit Manager
Walworth County
Elkhorn, Wisconsin

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

When the Walworth County, Wisconsin employee wellness program started asking employees to participate in health risk assessments (HRAs) with biometric screenings in 2005, many employees were hesitant to join in.

“At first, when this program was rolled out, they were a little bit concerned about why we were doing this and what type of knowledge we would have,” said Lisa Henke, CEBS, risk/benefit manager for the county.

Thirteen years later, 86% of eligible employees and their spouses participate in the annual screenings, and 42% of participants have their results sent directly to their personal physicians. “Everyone really likes the report they get from the vendor we’re using,” Henke said. “People have started to share their results with their physicians—who are impressed at all of the measurements we do for our employees at no cost to them—and that has helped generate support for our program.”

Located in southeastern Wisconsin, Walworth County employs more than 1,000 people, including 838 full-time employees, who work in health and human services, a skilled nursing facility, a special education school for the independent school districts of Walworth County, public works, the sheriff’s department and multiple departments at the government center and judicial center. The health insurance plan is self-funded.

HRAs

HRA participation is voluntary, but employees who participate in the wellness program pay less for their health insurance. Employees and their spouses who participate in the health insurance plan are eligible for the HRAs. Those

who receive a score of 25 or less pay 7% of the health care premium, while nonparticipants pay 12% of the premium. Scores are based on factors like weight, cholesterol, blood pressure and blood glucose levels. Employees who receive a score of 26 or higher on the HRA can choose to pay 10% of the premium or participate in a health coaching program and have the opportunity to earn the full discount.

Employees who are referred to coaching can choose from 12 six- to ten-week programs that focus on issues like tobacco cessation, preventing and managing high blood pressure, managing cholesterol, nutrition, sleep habits and achieving balance in life. They interact with a coach online or by telephone, and the coach determines whether the employee has satisfied the requirement to earn the higher discount on premiums.

Medical waivers are available for employees who can’t participate in the coaching. Last year, 40% of employees who were referred for coaching chose to participate. All of the employees who participated in coaching successfully completed the program.

The program has produced positive results. Henke said the program vendor estimated the county avoided \$4.79 in health costs for every \$1 spent on the HRA program in 2017. HRA data shows that employee health is improving in the areas of metabolic syndrome, diabetes and hypertension. In particular, 86 employees who had metabolic syndrome have moved to a healthier state.

Wellness Challenges

Quarterly wellness challenges are available to all employees and focus on encouraging healthy habits like weight loss, better nutrition and exer-

cise. Employees are surveyed every year to provide input to the program, and the 12-member Employee Wellness Council develops an annual program.

In 2017, challenges included a program to encourage people to avoid gaining weight over the holidays and a financial education challenge that asked employees to take steps like finding out how many credit cards they had, meeting with a representative for the county's deferred compensation plan or creating a budget.

The first challenge of 2018 was "Strive for Five," which encouraged employees to exercise 30 minutes a day five days a week. Employees could participate individually or as part of a team.

The current challenge, which ends May 19, is "Step It Up," in which teams compete to see which can record the number of steps it would take to reach a specific location in the United States first. Teams report their progress toward the location each week.

Prizes for the wellness challenges include state park passes and fitness items like kettle bells and yoga mats.

Get Fit 5K Run/Walk

The wellness program has found a creative solution to addressing two issues—program funding and motivating employees to exercise—by organizing an annual 5K run/walk.

Although the health fund pays for the HRA program, Walworth County does not use taxpayer dollars to pay for other aspects of the wellness program.

The annual Get Fit 5K Run/Walk is held in May at the Kettle Moraine State Park and is open to the community. The program donates 10% of the proceeds to a charity, and the remainder funds the wellness program. Last year's event raised \$4,600 for the program.

Increasing Participation and Engagement

Henke sees growing participation as a sign of success for the wellness program. For example, employee-taught on-



The Walworth County employee wellness program holds an annual 5K run/walk that helps fund the wellness program.

site exercise classes, which are offered after work or at lunch Monday through Thursday, have become more popular. The classes used to have a two-week break between six-week sessions, but participants now request that the classes continue without breaks.

Just as important, Henke sees other signs that employees are connecting with the wellness program. Employees are starting their own wellness groups and have asked the wellness council for help with communicating about them. One employee started a group that walks around downtown Elkhorn every Monday after work, and another employee has started an employee mountain-biking group.

“People are being more conscious of their health, and they’re reaching out to us to be able to help bring people together and be a resource to everybody,” Henke said.

Adapting to Needs

The county has found ways to adjust less successful programs to boost participation. A quarterly lunch-and-learn program that had low attendance is now offered online so employees can watch at their convenience anytime and anywhere, including at home with their family members.

The wellness program also tried starting walking groups led by a wellness council member at three parks in the county, either after work or on Saturday mornings, but the program was not well-attended. In 2017, the wellness program revamped and renamed the program “Pack the Parks.” Employees were encouraged to visit the parks on their own or with their families, snap a selfie and send it to the wellness committee to be entered into a prize drawing.

Walworth County has received recognition for its efforts, including the gold-level Well Workplace designation from the Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) in 2015, and has been named as one of the Healthiest Companies in America by Interactive Health, its wellness program vendor.

Henke credits the success of the program to leadership support and peer involvement. “Once you have the support of senior leadership, the program needs to be designed and run by employees from each department. We have seen increased success in our programs when peers are cheering on peers in the events.”



A runner registers for the annual Get Fit 5K Run/Walk organized by the Walworth County employee wellness program.

benefits

MAGAZINE

Reproduced with permission from *Benefits Magazine*, Volume 55, No. 5, May 2018, pages 34-37, published by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (www.ifebp.org), Brookfield, Wis. All rights reserved. Statements or opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the International Foundation, its officers, directors or staff. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted.

