

what's working

near-site wellness center
improves employee health,
productivity



Nicole Stec
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by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

When Linda Palmer was experiencing knee pain in November, she knew just where to go for medical advice.

Palmer, who works as an office assistant in the human resources department for the city of Mesa, Arizona, booked an appointment at the city's Employee Health and Wellness Center, where she got a referral for an x-ray, received her diagnostic testing followup from her provider and was referred to a physical therapist.

She didn't have to pay out of pocket for the office visit and had the comfort of familiarity with the medical staff. "The providers are so great at listening, asking questions and giving advice," Palmer said. "They put you at ease right away, and I believe that is so important."

That type of personal attention was one of the goals city officials had when they decided to open a wellness center for the city's 3,500 employees and their dependents (a population of more than 10,000 beneficiaries). The near-site wellness center opened in 2014, and leaders say the city has realized savings related to productivity gains and improvement in employee health.

"We've been able to address chronic conditions much earlier and prevent a lot of long-term costs that we may have had," said Nicole Stec, employee health and wellness manager.

Goals

In addition to improving the health of city employees and their dependents, city officials saw the center as "an opportunity to improve employee satisfaction, retention and morale. Those were some of the more important factors in doing this in order to make Mesa a great place to work and set us apart from other organizations in Arizona," Stec said.

Government workers tend to change employment to different government entities, so retention

was an issue, she explained. The center "would make us different and make it a great benefit to be an employee of the city of Mesa."

Improving access to primary care and the quality of care were other important goals. When people visit their primary care physicians in typical settings, the doctors often may not have the time to address patients' overall health, Stec said. In its selection process, the city looked for a provider that would make available 30-minute visits to discuss the patient's entire health.

Center Details

The City of Mesa Health and Wellness Center is technically a near-site clinic because it's not inside a city building. It is a completely separate building about ten minutes away from Mesa City Plaza, which is one of the main municipal buildings. The city contracts with OnSite Care to operate the center.

"We did a ZIP code analysis of where all of our employees live and where our main city buildings were," Stec said. "Mesa spans about 132 square miles, so we have city buildings everywhere. This location is as centrally located as we could get. It's also pretty close to one of our major freeways, so it allows people to access it pretty easily whether they're coming from home or work."

Employee confidentiality is another advantage of operating the clinic in a separate building, Stec noted. Both employees and their family members should feel more comfortable not having to visit a workplace to see the doctor.

A staff of ten, including a physician, nurse practitioner and physician's assistant, works out of the 4,000-square-foot facility. The staff is employed by the contractor. Stec is the liaison between the center operator and the city and manages the building. She and a full-time health educator work in the building.

Center start-up costs totaled about \$450,000, and annual operating costs total about \$1.6 million.

Wellness center services include:

- Preventive care such as annual physicals, wellness exams and vaccinations. Center staff can perform blood draws, and samples are sent to an outside laboratory.
- Episodic care such as treatment for ear infections, migraines or other acute issues
- Basic skin procedures such as removal of lesions
- Condition management for patients with hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol
- Required job-specific examinations, including drug screens, commercial driver's license exams and others
- Pharmacy
- Health coaching
- Dermatology.

The city is investigating adding more services, including physical therapy or chiropractic care and behavioral health.

All employees enrolled in one of the city's health plans may use the center. Employees who retired on or after January 1, 2017 and had established care at the center prior to retirement may also use the center until they reach Medicare eligibility.

Plan participants are not required to use the center, but office visits are free. They may see additional charges depending on the procedure. For ex-



The Employee Health and Wellness Center for employees of the city of Mesa, Arizona opened in 2014.

ample, the center can perform blood draws, but the laboratory charges are billed through insurance.

Employees can generally get an appointment within one to three days of calling, Stec said. They are allowed to use sick hours to get their medical care—a benefit that is available regardless of where they receive the care.

Wellness Program Integration

“The near-site clinic has been an integral piece of the success of our wellness program and is really changing the culture here at the city,” Stec said. “It is a visual representation of what we’re doing around employee well-being.”

The wellness program started in 2016. Beginning in 2017, employees

were eligible to receive up to \$400 in financial incentives for participating in the program, including \$200 in gift cards and a \$200 health insurance premium discount, annually. They qualify for the incentives by earning points for certain activities, such as completing an annual biometric screening and undergoing a physical exam. “They can go to any primary care provider, but we really encourage them to use the wellness center because we make it really simple and seamless for them,” Stec said.

The wellness program has a digital platform with a website and a mobile app that links with employee fitness devices. Employees can earn points for physical activity.

Other wellness offerings include a chronic disease self-management program and tobacco cessation programs. The city began offering telephonic and digital health coaching services in 2018 and launched a mindful eating program in January.

Stec meets monthly with medical providers to discuss what kinds of issues they are seeing and ideas about improving health and providing resources.

Results

About 54% of eligible employees and beneficiaries are using the wellness center. It averages 60 new patients per month and has a 93% satisfaction rate.

In 2018, the wellness center eliminated more than \$1 million in costs related to lost productivity, including reduced absenteeism and presenteeism, improved employee retention, and time savings related to shorter travel and wait times for employees who visited the center.

City officials also believe the city has saved \$1.3 million through reduced use of higher cost providers such as emergency rooms and urgent care centers. Further, the city has avoided costs related to uncontrolled chronic diseases.

Regular surveys show that the percentage of the employee population with healthy behaviors has increased from 36.4% in December 2015 to 57.2% in March 2018. The surveys also show marked improvement in measures such as healthy eating habits, stress management and supportive work environments since 2015.

An increasing number of employees also believe that the city cares about their health. In 2015, a survey showed that 48% of employees believed that city leadership cared about their well-being, and now that number has climbed to nearly 82%.

Lessons Learned

Stec emphasized that the city's model may not work for all employers, but there is more than one model to consider. "Vendors in the employee health market are willing to customize their offerings," she said. Some employers have a center that is open only one day a week, and others might consider joining together to operate a center, she explained.

Communication is an important piece of wellness center success. When the center first opened, employees were invited to visit and get an appointment, but some had the impression that it was a walk-in clinic. "It's truly a center where you need to call for an appointment, just like a regular primary care medical office. There's been a lot of education and re-education with employees."

It's also critical to address employee confidentiality concerns. One of the reasons the city chose to contract with an outside provider was because it created an additional barrier between the employer and medical care, Stec added.

The city looks to continue expanding services at the wellness center. Dermatology services for employees and families were added in March. "The ability to evolve and meet the needs of the employee population is one of the significant benefits of having a health and wellness center," Stec said.