

# what's working

Washington Metropolitan Area  
Transit Authority (WMATA)

Imagine being a Washington, D.C. bus operator—maneuvering through heavy traffic as other drivers cut you off as you deal with distracting and sometimes abusive passengers. High-stress conditions combine with long hours, short breaks, shift changes and sitting most of the day.

About 8,500 members of Amalgamated Transit Union AFL-CIO Local 689 work for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). They operate or maintain buses and trains or work in construction, custodial or clerical jobs out of 14 large sites scattered throughout the District of Columbia and into Maryland and Virginia. Three-quarters of them are overweight or obese, and—no surprise—incidence of hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease is high.

For 1½ years, the Transit Employees' Health and Welfare Fund and Local 689 have tried to address health challenges with the "high-touch and high-tech" Local 689 Moving Metro Wellness Program, said James L. McGee, CEBS, the fund's executive director.

The premise is "we provide you with the information and opportunities to empower you to make small changes in your life, which goes a long way to improving overall morale," McGee said. "Improve workforce wellness and you improve productivity, reduce absences, improve job safety and reduce injuries on the job. We want to give Local 689 members practical tools to help them to be active and pay attention to their nutrition."

Nichole L. Weaver was hired in June

2014 as the wellness program manager. She spent most of her first year traveling to jobsites and meeting with people, getting a sense of what they needed and wanted, kicking off the program with a needs-and-interest survey.

"One of our major challenges is marketing and communicating our program," Weaver said. "Not everyone has access to e-mail or even a computer. And they work around the clock seven days a week. We wanted to come up with a creative and fun way to catch people's attention."

In 2015, Weaver wrote a script and worked with a videographer from WMATA to produce a 4½-minute video that is posted on the health fund website, with a link on Facebook. (See the sidebar.) Weaver and wellness specialist Brandon Graves, who joined the program last October, play the video at union meetings, wellness fairs and other jobsite events. New employees see it at their orientation, and it is shown at various media outlets—"anywhere we can get the link out there for our population to see it," Weaver said.

Noting the high-stress nature of workers' jobs, "the last thing we want for the wellness program is to ask people to do things that are going to cause them more stress," Weaver said. "We want to get the education out there that living healthy doesn't require drastic measures, that small steps over time can really add up to powerful results. We're encouraging members to be more active during their day, wherever and whenever they can, eat vegetables and choose healthier snacks,

The National Wellness Institute and the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans have collaborated to share examples of wellness programs in the workplace.



drink more water and find positive outlets for stress relief."

She said the program's challenge is to change the culture one person at a time. "It is the focus on individuals making changes that sets us apart. And because there are 8,500 individuals, it continues to evolve.

"When we first started last year, partnering with VirginPulse, we were doing monthly prize drawings," Weaver said. "In January 2016, we began offering a health insurance premium incentive (a maximum of \$65 quarterly; \$260 annually) to people who are actively participating. We brought on Brandon, who has been very helpful in getting boots on the ground at different jobsites so we can more effectively communicate that the program exists.

"I knew that given the nature of our

## “Moving Metro” Video Grabs Attention

The fast-paced and often humorous Local 689 Moving Metro Wellness video, against a backdrop of pulsing music, features 16 union members representing various WMATA job functions and worksites. They describe the partnership with VirginPulse that gives each participant a wearable activity tracker, the web portal with Healthy Living tips, and opportunities to earn points toward chances to win prizes by choosing and meeting individual goals.

As the video was being filmed over two months last summer, the featured employees “could tell us about their experiences,” Weaver said. “I started with a script detailing what I wanted to get across about the program, but the more fun scenes—where someone is choosing to take the stairs instead of an elevator or choosing water instead of a soda—were their own ideas.”

Employees’ personalities shine in the video. One bus mechanic mentions that he had lost 64 pounds and holds up a cell phone with a picture of “the old me” compared with “the new me.” An HVAC mechanic tells how he came home one day and found his wife and children taking a walk, “proving the old saying: If you save a man, you save his household. If you educate a man, you educate his household.” “It’s just addictive!” another station manager says as she checks the number of steps on her activity tracker.

View the video at [www.tehw.org/wellness/wellness-home.aspx](http://www.tehw.org/wellness/wellness-home.aspx).

population and their work environment, it was going to be a slow climb. But participation is increasing steadily.”

About 20% of eligible employees were participating in the program as of early April. Weaver said her goal is 35%. “A bigger issue is not just getting them signed up, but getting them engaged in the program on a regular basis.” Employees earn points by logging on to the wellness app daily, weekly or monthly to record activities, reading Healthy Living tips, setting and meeting goals on everything from eating more vegetables to stopping smoking to serving in the community. The point system is heavily weighted in favor of exercise. The activity tracker and app from VirginPulse are among the “high-tech” aspects of the program. The ability for members to accumulate points daily is what permits the fund to award incentives on a quarterly basis.

The wellness program so far hasn’t offered a systematic program of biometric screenings and health risk assessments. Some vendors do make them available at health and safety fairs at jobsites, but these data aren’t integrated into the well-

ness program, which makes it difficult to measure program outcomes. Weaver is optimistic the program will offer screenings and HRAs, both to help measure outcomes and as vehicles for sparking conversations about healthy habits.

But in these early stages of the wellness program, “we wanted to keep it on a more positive note and start out with some things that are a little less intrusive and more fun.” Weaver and Graves are continuing to organize wellness fairs at bus division sites and railyards that increasingly are requesting them.

Other examples of high-touch aspects of the program:

- In October 2015, the wellness team crafted and dispersed 1,500 Breast Cancer Awareness goodie bags.
- A team of 30 participated in the DC Color Run.
- A 30-minute stretch class was conducted at one of the rail maintenance garages.

- Maintenance workers who want to stretch and warm up before their shift begins have access to a dynamic warm-up program.
- Site visits have included activities such as how to make a salad in a jar, smoothie samples and blood pressure screenings.
- Weaver took a group of bus operators to the nearest grocery store on their lunch break to teach them how to read food labels.

Success has been somewhat anecdotal. “We get e-mails randomly from people—I call them ‘hidden gems’—who say, just in passing, ‘I’ve lost 30 pounds’ or ‘I’ve lost 60 pounds,’” Weaver said. “For me, as a program manager, I’m just blown away by that. They don’t feel like it’s a big deal, but that’s a huge deal. Go grab a 30-pound dumbbell and try carrying that around. If you lose that kind of weight by walking more and thinking about your food choices a little bit, that’s a huge success in my mind.”

McGee added that “the 689 Moving Metro program through Transit Employees’ Health and Welfare Fund is not a once-and-done approach. We aim for ongoing engagement.”