

Your Health at Work: Creating Healthy Working Environments

“Moving Grays Harbor”

By: Maryann Welch

Westport Shipyard and Rohm and Haas Chemicals in Elma have Flex and Stretch programs, Anchor Bank has a yearly Health Fair, Grays Harbor Paper and Rohm & Haas have employee driven wellness committees, our own Public Health and Social Services Department distributes a monthly Top Health Newsletter...the list could go on and on. These are just a few examples of the different faces we put on employee wellness initiatives. What is your employer doing for you?

Don't get me wrong, I think it is wonderful that employers are taking the initiative to improve and support the health behaviors of their employees, but I don't think it is their sole responsibility to make it happen. So, in equal measure, what are you doing as an employee regarding your own state of wellness?

It should come as no surprise to you that if you are employed full-time you spend the majority of your waking hours “on the job”. With the pace of life these days we have to be really committed to our own health in order to maintain it. That is what is so wonderful about employer wellness initiatives. If you are encouraged to make choices for health and your employer supports you in making those choices it is a win-win situation.

Take, for example, the initiation of a flex-and-stretch program. For those of you who don't know what this is, it is a program that helps warm up your muscles and body for the workday ahead so you are less prone to strains and sprains. It is usually designed to target areas of the body that are at highest risk and is tailored to your job demands...someone with a desk job would have different musculoskeletal demands than someone who works in a production setting.

Jaymie Towle, the Safety Director at Westport Shipyard, relates that they initiated a stretch and flex program about 15 years ago due to the high rate of soft-tissue injuries they were seeing. The program did meet with some initial resistance, but has since been received as a normal part of the work day. It serves as an employee meeting where supervisors can relay essential information and more importantly, it gets employees warmed up to start their shift.

With this example, the wellness initiative looks like it is only for the benefit of the employer who will save money on their industrial injury rates; however, this program also benefits employees. For those of you who have ever had an injury of any kind, you know it is no vacation. You find that you are not able to enjoy activities like you used to and simple tasks become nearly impossible to do without pain. I don't think I've ever heard anyone tell me they were happy they were injured.

“Not only has this program reduced soft-tissue injuries by about 50% over the last 15 years, it has helped our employees enjoy life away from work as well” states Jaymie.

Win-win.

Another example of a supportive atmosphere comes from the Rohm & Haas Company in Elma. Seven years ago a few employees got together to form a wellness committee. They felt that they could help each other stay committed to personal wellness goals if they developed a support group, thus gaining the support of management. Their first endeavor was the flex-n-stretch program. Every employee is encouraged to participate in flex-n-stretch daily. Their vision for this committee was “to enhance our health awareness to create healthier lifestyles at work and home” shares Wendy Goldsmith, who has volunteered to lead the committee since its inception. Over the years they have done a variety of activities that every employee is encouraged to participate in. They have a wellness information board that gets updated regularly with important health messages and they do blood pressure checks quarterly using certified volunteers from their staff. They do seek input from all the employees as to different activities to do throughout the year and Wendy relates that they are not just focused on diet and exercise; “We try to incorporate safety issues into the mix as well. Occasionally we have a “Health & Safety Bingo” contest where the squares on the card range from walking on your lunch break to checking your smoke detectors at home to reviewing a fire escape plan with you’re your family. The plant’s safety program is incorporated into the wellness program, and encourages safe work practices both at home, work and at play. Our goal is to be as encompassing as possible to encourage everyone to participate.”

Win-win.

I hope that these examples inspire you to take a look at what you can do in your own workplace. If you’d like a consultation on employee wellness, the

Grays Harbor Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring an **Employee Wellness Initiative** and provides free consultation services through the end of the year. If you would like more information, call the Chamber @ 532-1924, check out the website at: <http://www.graysharbor.org/grant.php>, or call 532-8631 x 483

Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County’s Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.