

Good health benefits employees and employers

Moving Grays Harbor

By Maryann Welch

As individuals it is fairly easy to identify the benefits of a healthier life style that would include fitting in more physical activity and adopting a healthier way of eating. So, what are the benefits to a business or organization in encouraging positive health changes in their employees? Well, experience has shown that employers can experience enhanced productivity, improved health care management costs, decreased rates of illness and injuries, and reduced employee absenteeism by focusing on health improvement for their workers. This month, June, seems like a good time to call attention to employee wellness efforts since it is National Employee Wellness Month.

Our locally-based Bank of the Pacific was motivated to think about pro-active employee wellness strategies when the organization realized that high healthcare claims were driving up costs. Lynn Paylor, Human Resources Director for the Bank connected with the American Cancer Society for assistance. Sara Kimpe, a Regional Manager whose focus is on employee wellness in Grays Harbor and Mason Counties, suggested the Bank start with the Cancer Society's "Active For Life" program.

The Bank committed to inviting employees to participate in this 10-week effort that encourages workers to be more active on a regular basis. Each

individual sets their own goals based on current activity level. For instance, an inactive person might set a goal to walk at least 15 minutes a day. A website allows employees to log in activity minutes to earn points and track progress toward their goal. Employee teams are an important facet as they provide motivation, encouragement, and foster some competition within the company. Dennis Long, the President of the Bank, noted that the competitive angle "really took hold, increased the enthusiasm", and has driven workers to request more such activities.

To the delight of the Bank's management, 95% of its 233 employees throughout Western Washington took part in the program. Dennis was especially impressed that the program "went far beyond what I thought it would" and states, "we are an inspired group." Visible results of weight loss and happier employees have already been evident according to Dennis. The organization is now assessing ways to sustain the energy into the future, realizing that in order to see the big "dividends" of improvements in absenteeism, performance, and medical costs it will take a comprehensive approach applied over time.

Sara let me know that the City of Hoquiam is in the middle of their own "Active For Life" course. Celina Batchelor, Hoquiam's Payroll Clerk, shared that about half of the City's 46 employees have signed on. This current effort is the latest strategy the City has undertaken in the last 2 years to address the wellbeing of its workers. In addition to the 10-week program, The Cancer Society shares a "Healthy Living" newsletter with participants, and organizes lunch time "learning" sessions that focus on a wide range of health and nutrition topics.

Celina appreciates the approach of the “Active For Life” plan as it focuses on increasing activity from each person’s current experience and “doesn’t try to put everyone in to one mold.” Not everyone is going to have the goal of running a 10K race and this program seems to emphasize that when it comes to health that the “one-size-fits-all” approach is not what helps individuals achieve success.

According to Brian Shay, the city’s administrator, Hoquiam has won a “Well City Award” from the Association of Washington Cities for their efforts to improve the health of City workers. As a result of this award, the City will receive a 2% reduction in medical premiums for their health insurance coverage. This is certainly a benefit for the City’s bottom line, but in addition Brian is convinced that the focus on wellness has boosted morale as well as improved the fitness level of employees. He shared that as a result of the “Active For Life” undertaking, two employees have quit smoking along with increasing their activity level. Bravo!

Increased medical premiums or costs may be the original factor for many employers in introducing employee wellness efforts, but the other benefits help the bottom line for businesses as well. Of course, the ultimate benefit of any wellness effort is to help employees live overall healthier lives.

If you are interested in learning what the American Cancer Society can do for your business or workplace, check out this link:

<http://www.acsworkplacesolutions.com/> I am confident that any investment in employee wellness is a benefit that [is can be](#) enjoyed by everyone.

Harbor County’s Public Health and Social Services Department, and an avid exercise enthusiast.

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.healthygh.org.

Maryann Welch is a life-long harborite, the retired director of Grays