

The Mercury News

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Opinion: Workplace wellness programs can save costs and lives

Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 04/02/2009 08:00:00 PM PDT

A serious threat to the economic stability and health of our nation continues to grow because of obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and stress. With the downturn in the economy and continuing rise in health care costs, employee wellness programs are more important than ever.

Well-designed programs can lower health care expenses and the use of traditional medical benefits; reduce employee turnover, absenteeism, injury and disability; and increase employee productivity, morale, loyalty and overall well-being. Companies like Fidelity and Blue Cross Blue Shield claim their employee wellness programs have shaved 25 percent off their annual health care inflation costs.

For this reason, Breathe California, the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce, Silicon Valley Leadership Group and others have joined the Healthy Silicon Valley Collaborative — an obesity and disease prevention initiative — to complete the first comprehensive study of its kind on wellness programs. The Go Well! Fit For Work survey, supported by a Health Trust grant, is an effort to gather critical baseline data on employer offerings in greater Silicon Valley.

The results will allow participating organizations to compare their programs to groups of similar size and type. That will assist in developing new

programs, refining existing ones and establishing an employer mentoring project to increase the number and quality of programs in the area.

Wellness programs aren't just for large corporations. The smallest of businesses, as well as nonprofits, faith-based organizations and government agencies, can benefit from them. Elements can be as simple as providing a microwave or refrigerator so employees can bring in healthy meals. Other workplace offerings include health-focused newsletters and access to fitness centers. Santa Clara County sends a nutritionist to small businesses to teach low-wage workers about workplace wellness.

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are important but underutilized services that provide counseling and other help with personal and family problems that can distract employees from their jobs. Some 20 to 25 percent of workers experience these problems every year, and probably more in stressful times. Programs focused on work-life balance can prevent crises that otherwise would affect the bottom line of employers.

To expand and improve wellness programs, we need better information on what's being done. This is where the confidential Go Well! Fit For Work survey (<http://www.healthysiliconvalley.org/survey/>) comes in. Every employer, even those with just a few employees, should fill it out. It takes five minutes, and participants will get exclusive access to the survey data. The deadline is April 24, but there are incentives for early completion.

Wellness programs are not a panacea for chronic disease. Government has a role as well. For instance, eliminating federal subsidies for corn products used to produce high-fructose corn syrup and other unhealthy foods would make a big difference. Municipal planning and land-use

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policies can also promote health: Neighborhoods need markets with healthy foods, not just convenience stores, and parks and trail networks are critical for recreation and exercise.

But workplace wellness programs can create a culture of health and well-being that changes behavior, benefiting employers, employees, families and society as a whole, while saving money at every level. And every individual can make a difference.

Kerri Hamilton co-chairs the Healthy Silicon Valley Community Sector. She wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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