



Austin's Steps Program

Supporting healthy work sites and reducing health care costs

What is the public health problem?

Obesity contributes to high rates of absenteeism and increased health care costs. The costs of obesity (excluding overweight) at a firm with 1,000 employees are estimated to be \$285,000 per year. Approximately 30% of this total results from increased absenteeism.*

- According to 2006[†] Steps Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data, about half of adults in Austin do not engage in 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity 5 or more days per week.
- Almost 37% of adults in Austin said they were overweight, and more than 26% said they were obese.

How Steps is responding

To help reduce obesity rates, the Steps Program supports a city work-site wellness program that provides transit operators access to exercise facilities, healthy foods, and health assessments to help them manage their weight.

- The Steps Program partners with Capital Metro, the Austin Transit authority, and its wellness services vendor to provide consultations with dietitians and personal trainers, a 24-hour company fitness center, and personalized health assessments.
- Through the wellness program, transit operators also receive discounts for purchasing healthier foods in the company's cafeteria and can enroll in a myriad of weight and nutrition management programs.

- Cash incentives reward employees for joining weight-loss programs, quitting tobacco use, using the on-site gym, and achieving other health-related goals.

What is the impact?

- Since 2004, annual increases in Capital Metro's health care costs have slowed substantially. Total costs increased a little less than 10% between 2004 and 2005, compared with an almost 27% increase between 2003 and 2004.
- Program participants report significant improvements in physical activity, healthy food consumption, weight loss, blood pressure management, stress levels, and overall general health.
- The purchase of "healthy choice" options in the employee cafeteria increased by 172%.
- Employee absenteeism rates—an indicator of worker job satisfaction and health—decreased by 44%, from a high of about 12% in March 2004 to slightly less than 7% in June 2006.

Why this program is working

Studies show that comprehensive work-site health programs focused on lifestyle changes lead to improvements in employees' health[‡] and a high return on employers' investments in terms of lower health care costs.*

* American Journal of Health Promotion. 2005; 20:45–51.

[†] Most recent data available

[‡] http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/library/toolkit/pdfs/six_step_guide.pdf