

# Success Story - Public Sector

## City of Fort Worth

When the City of Fort Worth became self-insured in 2001, Mayor Mike Moncrief and the city council began to explore strategies to lower health-insurance costs for the city's 6,000 employees. In late 2001, the city hired Vicki Tieszen to launch a worksite wellness program in January 2002.

Tieszen developed a comprehensive wellness strategy designed to keep employees at their best and to reduce health-claims costs. The program offers a variety of free wellness and health-promotion services including lunch seminars, disease management programs, walking groups, and classes on changing lifestyle behavior.

"All participation is on company time," says Tieszen, who believes increased productivity and improved morale more than make up for any missed work time.

The foundation of the program is an annual health screening, held each March. By participating in two consecutive screenings and meeting a certain number of health-behavior criteria, city employees are eligible for an award of up to \$250 in cash or up to 15 hours in additional vacation time.

"Cash has been the most popular incentive," says Tieszen, noting that more than 60 percent of participants have chosen that option. The 2005 awards totaled \$175,350 in cash and almost 7,000 hours in leave.

The challenge of worksite wellness programs is having employees stay with a program long enough to realize its benefits. "We expected to see cost impact three to five years into the program," says Tieszen. And they have. "This is the first year with no increase in employee premiums," she says.



## Lessons Learned

**Confidentiality of data is critical**

**Ensure a firewall between personnel and wellness data**

**Top management support is critical**

**H**owever, benefits administrator Bob Molloy believes that the bottom-line benefits began earlier. “Last year, other employers were experiencing an increase in premiums of 15 percent to 16 percent, while ours increased only 8 percent,” he says. “And now, as we look to the upcoming year, our health-insurance costs will be about \$10 million less than we had budgeted.”

Tieszen speaks enthusiastically about the decreasing number of high-risk employees. “Three years ago, 56 percent of those participating were in the high-risk category,” she says. “This year, we’re down to 22 percent. That’s a 154 percent decrease among participants. Healthier people are happier, more productive, and miss less work.”

From her first day, Tieszen worked to address two critical issues: management support and employee trust. “I had strong support from our city manager and from the department heads,” she says. “Top-level support is critical. I also hit them hard as role models.” Tieszen gives department heads summaries of aggregated data of their employees, not individual data, so they can have a sense of how their employees are doing compared to the organization as a whole. “Not surprisingly,” she says, “wellness has become competitive among departments.”

To build trust, employees must feel confident that their data remains confidential. “That’s the biggest lesson—confidentiality,” agrees Tieszen. Protecting confidentiality is why she doesn’t recommend putting a worksite wellness program under Human Resources.

“There should be a firewall between personnel and wellness to reassure employees about confidentiality,” she says. “I met with every department head to address the issue up front. We insist that the health data be stored on an off-site server. Now, after several years, I rarely have to address the issue. People know their data is not misused.”

The lesson from the City of Fort Worth is clear: “If you’re not doing anything around employee wellness,” says Tieszen, “you should be. People have to take more personal responsibility for their health.”

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