

Texas

Austin, TX: Saving Health Care Dollars and Reducing Employee Absences through a Worksite Wellness Program

Producing Results

The Steps Program in Austin, TX helped to implement a worksite wellness program for Capital Metro, the Austin transit authority. The program's remarkable success led to decreases in health care costs and employee absences and improvements in participants' health and engagement in healthy behaviors. Total health costs increased only 9.6% from 2004 to 2005, compared with 26.8% from 2003 to 2004; the company predicted that costs would increase only 6% from 2005 to 2006. Employee absenteeism rates decreased more than 44%, from a high of 12.4% in March 2004 to 6.9% in June 2006. Program participants reported significant improvements in physical activity, healthy food consumption, weight loss, blood pressure management, stress levels, and overall general health.

Public Health Problem

According to data from the 2005 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), half of all adults in the Steps intervention area do not engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, 5 or more days a week. Additionally, 75% of adults reported eating fruits and vegetables less than five or more times a day, 37% said they were overweight, and 17% said they were obese. Obesity results in significant increases in medical expenditures and absenteeism among full-time employees. 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 (*American Journal of Health Promotion*; 2005; 20:45–51).

Taking Action

The Steps Program in Austin, TX is partnering with Capital Metro, the Austin transit authority, to implement a worksite wellness program. The Steps Program works closely with Capital Metro's health and wellness vendor, which provides consultations with dietitians and personal trainers, a 24-hour company fitness center, and personalized health assessments. Through the wellness program, transit operators have unlimited access to Capital Metro's newly developed fitness center and can enroll in a myriad of weight and nutritional management programs. The company-sponsored Healthy Cafeteria pilot program provides discounts and incentives to purchase healthier selections at the lunch café. For example, with a coupon, a whole wheat breakfast taco with turkey bacon, turkey sausage, or egg whites will cost less than a regular taco with regular sausage, bacon, or eggs with yolks. Cash incentives reward employees for joining weight-loss programs, quitting tobacco use, using the on-site gym, and achieving other health-related goals such as lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Implications and Impact

Since launching the program in 2003, Capital Metro has experienced substantial reductions in its health care costs. Total costs increased only 9.6% from 2004 to 2005, compared with 26.8% from 2003 to 2004, and the company predicted that health care costs would increase only 6% from 2005 to 2006. Program participants continue to report significant improvements in physical activity, healthy food consumption, weight loss, blood pressure management, stress levels, and overall general health. Employee absenteeism rates—an indicator of worker job satisfaction and health—also decreased more than 44%, from a high of 12.4% in March 2004 to 6.9% in June 2006.