

# Worksite Wellness

## IN STATE HEALTH AGENCIES

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*“By serving as models of success, we will help our nation move from an unhealthy worksite culture to one focused on healthy employees who are eating well, moving around, and contributing to the overall effectiveness and productivity of our organizations.”*

—Paul Jarris, MD, Executive Director, ASTHO

J. Nick Baird, MD, CEO, US Healthiest

*“Walking the Walk,” Journal of Public Health Management and Practice<sup>1</sup>*

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Worksite wellness programs can help state health agencies support the physical and emotional well-being of their employees. As organizations promoting the health of their citizens, state health agencies also can serve as a model for other agencies and businesses in their communities, “walking the walk.” By serving as models of success, state health agencies can help the United States move from an unhealthy worksite culture to one focused on healthy, active employees who are contributing to the overall effectiveness and productivity of their organizations. Health departments can also apply for HealthLead accreditation and promote this accreditation initiative to employers in their jurisdictions.

Worksite wellness programs provide an opportunity for employers to encourage their employees to achieve a high status of health and well-being while at the worksite, allowing employees to live a healthy lifestyle and employers to benefit from a healthy and engaged workforce. To achieve this, the employer must provide much more

than an exercise facility or gym membership. Worksite wellness programs must provide a comprehensive approach to meet employees’ needs and ensure effective outcomes. Studies show that many worksite wellness programs fall short and as a result do not achieve effective outcomes in the workforce.

### **The Value of Worksite Wellness**

The use of evidence-based and evidence-informed practices along with the seven core elements of a comprehensive worksite wellness program listed on p. 2 will ensure that a program is reasonably designed and will reach a large audience. Extensive research on comprehensive worksite wellness programs has estimated their return on investment at roughly \$2 to \$6 for every dollar invested.<sup>2,3</sup> The last two components of the seven core elements add the key concepts of continuous quality improvement and evaluation to the scope of a comprehensive worksite wellness program, to ensure that the program is evidence based and producing desired outcomes.



## 7 Core Elements of a Comprehensive Worksite Wellness Program

*As defined by Healthy People 2010 and Partnerships for a Healthy Workforce*

- Health education
- Supportive social and physical environments
- Integration of the worksite programs
- Linkage to related programs
- Screening programs
- Follow-up interventions
- Evaluation and improvement process

## Worksite Wellness Accreditation for the Public and Private Sectors

Roughly 90 percent of large firms and 60 percent of smaller firms provide some type of wellness program,<sup>4</sup> but the 2004 National Worksite Health Promotion Survey found that only 6.9 percent of responding worksites offered a comprehensive worksite health promotion program.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this lack of scope, the majority of worksite wellness programs may not be producing the best possible outcomes. This is a possible cause for recent studies' findings that debate the effectiveness of worksite wellness projects in the United States.

US Healthiest is a nonprofit organization established in 2008 with a vision to improve America's health in the workplace and at home. Through the HealthLead accreditation process, US Healthiest performs evaluations with "comprehensive measures of health and well-being," focusing on the culture of wellness within the organization and the "economic return on investment of employee health."<sup>6</sup> Accreditation by an unbiased organization evaluating through comprehensive measures, such as HealthLead, may prove beneficial and increase worksite wellness programs' positive outcomes. Accreditation helps to ensure that organizations are implementing comprehensive worksite wellness programs that are focused on creating a culture of wellness, while still unique to the organization and its participants. Target and Worthington Industries are examples of organizations that have successfully accomplished this through HealthLead.

## Using Quality Improvement to Promote Wellness for State Employees in Oklahoma

*"By using this quality improvement process and the HealthLead assessment, we were not only able to see the areas we excelled in, but also the gaps in programs and policies where we could improve. It led to a larger conversation with our governor, and now we are looking at worksite wellness and insurance wellness incentives for all state employees, which we hadn't done before."*

**—Terry Cline, Commissioner of Health  
Oklahoma State Department of Health**

HealthLead places a heavy emphasis on organizations' cultures of wellness. The creation of such a culture is a complex process that requires engaged leadership. According to the book *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, "Roughly 50 to 70 percent of how

employees perceive their organization's climate can be traced to the actions of one person: the leader."<sup>7</sup>

The Oklahoma State Department of Health used the HealthLead assessment in conjunction with a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to evaluate its own worksite wellness program; it also extended the evaluation and partnership to the state's Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and the Department of Tourism and Recreation. Oklahoma Commissioner of Health Terry Cline is leading the CQI initiative with a focus on worksite wellness to improve the health of Oklahomans.

The team working on this initiative is using PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles to determine how to respond to the HealthLead assessment and improve their score. After the team began its work, team members quickly realized that data on health outcomes across multiple agencies are not easily accessible. Through the leadership of the state health commissioner, they were able to acquire the data needed to analyze their agency's health outcomes, a major component of the assessment. This led to a larger discussion with the governor on benefits, programs, and policies for all state employees. Prior to this CQI project, the Oklahoma State Department of Health was not closely involved with the statewide employee wellness benefits and programs. This initiative has opened up communications between agencies and created a focus on wellness for state employees.

## Leading with Accreditation and Enhancing Partnerships in North Dakota

*"We're working with workplaces across North Dakota to improve the health and wellness of employees as part of a sustainable public health strategy. This seems to make sense, particularly in light of anticipated fiscal contraction. The health department needs to practice worksite wellness not only for the health and wellness of our employees but also as a model for worksites across the state."*

**—Terry Dwelle, MD, State Health Officer  
North Dakota**

Accreditation with an organization such as US Healthiest can guide organizations and businesses through the development and evaluation of a worksite wellness program. Organizations going through the HealthLead assessment process are provided with a score summary report and gap analysis, allowing them to select the route that best fits with their organization's values in improving their worksite health promotion efforts.<sup>8</sup> A program that fits with participants' values is more effective in both implementation and resulting participation.

The North Dakota Department of Health contracted with Winkelman Inc. in 2001 to survey businesses across the state of North Dakota. A large number of the businesses wanted comprehensive worksite wellness but needed someone or some organization to facilitate the process. Many businesses expressed that they wanted to do



worksite wellness “right” because they understood that it could improve their bottom line. The health department took the lead in bringing together stakeholders, developing and providing worksite wellness facilitator training as part of a sustainable comprehensive statewide worksite wellness system. The stakeholders organized under the Healthy North Dakota collaborative now own, finance, and run the program. Though the Department of Health is part of the Healthy North Dakota collaborative and has used some Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant dollars to help fund the program, state general fund dollars have never been appropriated to support this effort. The North Dakota Worksite Wellness program is sustained primarily by private dollars.

In March 2014, North Dakota was awarded bronze accreditation by HealthLead, making it the first state health agency to achieve HealthLead accreditation. Sharing his thoughts on the role of the state health agency in worksite wellness, Dwelle says, “To make worksite wellness succeed, it must become a major part of a health department’s strategic plan. In our case, the health department not only committed to department worksite wellness but played a major role in initiating the program and developing a collaborative of private stakeholders to develop a business plan for

sustainability across the state. It took seven years to get to this point, and we still have a long way to go.”

The North Dakota Department of Health has an overarching wellness committee that provides technical support for department worksite wellness programs. The department uses both traditional project and community engagement approaches to worksite wellness as they apply. The traditional project approach generally does things “to” people, while community engagement does things “with” people. Dwelle shares that “the health department is composed of multiple communities, not just one. Those communities are defined by people who know each other by first name and also have a shared sense of responsibility for each other. Whenever this definition of community is met, community engagement techniques can often be utilized to facilitate the group to own their problems and solutions. Each of the health department’s communities is unique. They have different perceptions of worksite wellness. Some are very progressive and have established ‘community worksite wellness committees’ and developed programs like accountability groups around things like weight control and exercise. Others are not active at all. The community engagement part of comprehensive worksite wellness must move at the pace of the community, not the facilitator. True community engagement is facilitating a process of problem solving, not just a project.”

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## References

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