

'Inside and Out' – Employee Wellness Program Management Innovation: Human Resources

Overview

Physical well-being, emotional health and fiscal fitness are the three primary goals of our 'Inside and Out' Employee Wellness Program. Recognizing that each is important to the overall health and welfare of our employees, we have developed a fully integrated HR program that strives to provide services and educational opportunities in support of the health and well-being of our staff.

Meeting Strategic Objectives

Increasingly, employers are realizing that the health and well-being of employees is of tantamount importance to the health of an organization. Employee wellness programs are essential to the long-term viability of all businesses and have been proven to reduce health care costs and absenteeism, resulting in improved productivity and employee morale. Research has also shown that these programs offer a positive return-on-investment making them a benefit that costs more to avoid than to provide.

Our wellness program was designed to help our employees make smart choices and do the following:

- increase productivity;
- boost morale and vitality;
- reduce absenteeism;
- reduce stress;
- control preventable healthcare costs within the agency; and
- provide financial tools and education to improve the fiscal fitness of our employees.

Program Details

Our 'Inside and Out' employee wellness program is administered by our Human Resources staff with support from outside vendors. The costs associated with the program vary from year to year. This past year we have spent less than \$10,000 on our wellness program. We also work with many non-profit agencies to receive free or low cost services. In return, we have experienced a significant decrease in our absenteeism and health insurance costs (our health insurance premiums were projected to increase at 14% but actually came in at 9%).

On an annual basis, we undertake a health risk assessment to assist us with the plan design for the next program. Over the past few years, we have noticed a trend developing regarding the increased level of stress related illness and complaints. Further investigation revealed that our staff was not exempt from the same financial challenges that all of Rhode Island was facing. As a result, we incorporated fiscal fitness into our wellness program.

The wellness program provides services and education on a variety of subjects, offered in a variety of formats:

- staff training sessions,
- voluntary seminars,
- one-on-one confidential training and counseling
- group and individual physical activities, and
- educational resources offered through our insurance companies and various third-party vendors.

Topics covered include a broad range of health and financial issues, including:

- *Nutrition.* Diet can significantly impact an employee's ability to do their job effectively and these programs educate employees about food options and equip them to make healthy dietary choices. In addition to our lunch & learns, we offer weekly Weight Watcher meetings.

- *Physical Fitness.* In addition to diet, exercise is an important factor in a healthy lifestyle. The 'Inside and Out' program provides opportunities to incorporate exercise into employees' daily lives. We have an on-site exercise facility and use a personal trainer to help employees develop a program as well as show them how to use the equipment.
- *Smoking Cessation.* Statistics prove that smokers tend to fall ill more frequently than their non-smoking peers, disrupting the workplace. Also, as smoking causes many health issues, by stopping smoking, our employees can live longer, healthier lives.
- *Physiological Testing.* We offer access to physiological tests, including cholesterol tests, blood pressure screenings, and skin cancer awareness as they can provide early warning signs for more serious problems.
- *Stress Management.* Stress itself takes a toll on employees and is linked to other health problems such as depression, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity. Our wellness program helps employees deal with stress (both professional and personal stress) as a way to improve their psychological and physical health.
- *Fiscal Fitness.* Educational programs provide staff with budgeting techniques and the principles required to successfully manage their finances and use credit intelligently. Staff are also able to access credit counseling services, debt management plans, and housing counseling as part of this program.

All aspects of the program are regularly communicated with staff through postings throughout our building, intranet, emails to all staff and inclusion on our agency-wide calendar. Senior staff work to stress the importance of employee wellness and encourage staff participation at all levels of the agency.

We developed our fiscal program based on a health risk assessment and the current economic conditions of our state and country. Rhode Island Housing not only serves people struggling in this poor economic climate, but our staff are also suffering from the effects of this recession. We realized that while our staff work diligently to help others in crisis, many of them are dealing with stress related to their finances as well.

We see people every day who are struggling with underwater mortgages, a loss of home equity, rising gaps between what they earn and housing costs, as well as other financial pressures. Our staff are not immune to the factors that lead others to seek our assistance and we created our wellness program that recognizes our employees' needs. Our program recognizes that our staff are living and working in the same uncertain economic conditions as our clients and in order to fulfill our mission, we need staff who are healthy – inside and out. When our employees are healthy physically and psychologically, performance is at its peak.

Costs

The costs of implementing our wellness program are minimal compared to the benefits. In most instances, we fund the program costs, while in others staff pays a small fee (*please see attached listing of specific programs and associated fees*) and others are free to us and our employees. While we work to keep costs down, we believe that the costs are a meaningful investment in employee health as well as a business investment that directly impacts our bottom line.

Benefits

Our 'Inside and Out' program is a win-win for both Rhode Island Housing and its employees.

Benefits to Employees:

- weight loss,
- improved physical and mental fitness,
- increased concentration and energy level,
- decreased stress, and
- decreased insurance premiums for participation.

Benefits to Employer:

- employee retention and reduction in staff turnover;
- reduced health care costs;
- decreased use of sick leave;
- reduced employee absenteeism;
- improved employee relations and morale; and
- increased productivity and work performance.

The Results

In addition to the programs we offer, Rhode Island Housing has made a commitment to serving healthy food at our meetings and events and also in vending machines in order to help our employees make good eating choices. We also post information on food content, caloric intake, and other nutritional details in our lunch room to underscore the importance of healthy eating habits.

Our staff has lost a total of 350 lbs. in 2010 alone! In addition, 10 employees have successfully completed the smoking cessation program and they are having a positive influence on other smokers in the workplace.

Why it is meritorious:

Innovative: By looking at employees' health in a holistic way, we are moving beyond a very narrow interpretation of "wellness" and responding to staff needs.

Replicable: The programs we offer to staff and the organizations we partner with are available to other HFAs within their own states.

Respond to a management challenge or opportunity: With increased need and pressures on our agency and staff, we needed to find a way to offer meaningful health programs to keep employees healthy and in top shape to deal with the issues we are currently facing and those that lie ahead.

Achieve measurable improvements in agency operations: Reduced absenteeism and improved health and morale have a very real and meaningful impact on agency operations.

Provide benefits that outweigh costs: Our employee wellness program is a benefit that costs more to avoid than to provide as it reduces absenteeism and health care costs.

Demonstrate effective use of resources: Our Human Resources staff is able to tap into the many programs offered to us by our health insurance agency as well as other non-profit and healthcare organizations, allowing us to keep costs to a minimum.

Achieve strategic objectives: These services don't just help maintain the health of our employees on the 'inside and out,' the program's name also speaks to the fact that it contributes to the health of our agency (inside) and the health of the people we serve (outside). Improved employee morale, health and well-being have a very real and measurable impact on the services we provide to our customers.