Introduction

Worksite wellness programs are designed to support employee health and encourage positive lifestyle behaviors such as increased physical activity, healthy eating, reduced tobacco exposure and reduced stress. A healthy, motivated employee is vitally important to a workplace as a whole and has a significant impact on an employer’s bottom line.

Employers are often highly motivated to offer some form of worksite wellness program, seeking to increase productivity, decrease health care costs, and support their staff in their desire to be healthier. A worksite wellness program usually provides a positive return on investment: after two to five years, the annual return on investment for worksite wellness programs is $3-$6 saved for every $1 spent after about two to five years.1,2,3

Methods

Public health has long been interested in worksites as a focus for health improvement. Worksite wellness programs have the potential to reach large numbers of people and support behaviors that improve health both at the job and in all parts of a person’s life.

In the fall of 2011, MDH contracted Wyoming Survey & Analysis Center (WYSAC), University of Wyoming, to conduct a state-wide survey of worksite wellness practices and policies. At the time the sample was created, over 40,000 worksites existed in Minnesota. Of interest for this study were all worksites within the State of Minnesota with at least 10 employees. 2550 total worksites were surveyed, and completed surveys were obtained from 772 worksites (a response rate of 30 percent), with an overall plus or minus 3.49 percent margin of error with a 95 percent confidence level.
The survey measured several aspects of worksite wellness climate and acceptance:

- Receptive to worksite wellness
- Health messages supporting worksite wellness
- Wellness program in place
- Employment practices supporting wellness
- Employee Assistance Program offerings

Summary of written worksite wellness policies in place

**Key findings**

The survey found that, in Minnesota, almost a quarter (23 percent) of all worksites have a worksite wellness program, with programs more common among large employers (55 percent for worksites of 100 or more employees) than smaller employers (19 percent for less than 100 employees). Even fewer worksites have a strategic workforce wellness plan in place.

Despite less than one quarter of businesses having worksite wellness programs, employers are generally open to the idea. Seven out of eight (87 percent) indicated that they are receptive to policy change or development, with nearly all larger employers receptive (97 percent) and seven out of eight smaller employers receptive (85 percent).

Meanwhile, a relatively low percentage of companies communicate about worksite wellness to their employees. While 53 percent of employers send worksite safety messages, only about a quarter (27 percent) of companies sent health-related messages from senior management to employees. The messages companies send vary by topic. Of the disease prevention-related topics, the highest is physical activity at 41 percent, and less than a third of companies send messages regarding nutrition, weight management, tobacco use cessation, depression, alcohol abuse, high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol. Only 15 percent of companies have done a health risk assessment in the past twelve months.

**Tobacco**

Sixty-eight percent of employers have written tobacco policies. However, nearly nine out of ten (89 percent) large employers have a written tobacco policy (worksites having 100 or more employees) while about two thirds (65 percent) of smaller worksites (less than 100 employees) do.

Slightly more than one quarter of employers promote QUITPLAN, a no-cost cessation program for employees. Over half (51 percent) of large employers promote quit smoking services, while less than one quarter (23 percent) of smaller employers do. Only five percent of employers support cessation activities during the work day.

Making medications available to help quit smoking through health insurance varies greatly, with two-thirds (67 percent) of large employers and just over a third of smaller employers (36 percent) offering it. Large employees are also much more likely to have a written policy about tobacco use (89 percent versus 65 percent for less than 100 employees). Of those who do, one third ban smoking everywhere on or in company property.

---

**During the past decade, interest in health promotion at the worksite has spread rapidly. In Minnesota, about 55 percent of employers with 100 or more employees now offer some form of health promotion program.**
Physical activity
Only 6 percent of employers have a worksite wellness policy on physical activity. While a third responded that they supported physical activity during work time, it is not clear whether these companies provide physical activity resources or that they simply allow it to take place. However, there is evidence of positive worksite practices. Over half (57 percent) encourage use of stairs, almost half (47 percent) offer bike parking, and a quarter offer subsidized gym memberships.

Healthy eating
There are few written policies regarding healthy food options (6 percent) among Minnesota employers.

Where are healthy food options available? Vending machines are the most commonly reported source of worksite food. Two-thirds (65 percent) of large employers have vending available, while about a quarter (27 percent) of smaller employer do. The most commonly offered healthy food choice was “water/no calorie flavored water” and the least common was fresh vegetables. Worksites with 100 or more employees were more likely to offer healthy food choices.

Breastfeeding
Only 13 percent of worksites have written policies regarding breastfeeding, and few worksites offered resources to assist breastfeeding women’s return to the workplace. However, 84 percent of large worksites (worksites of 100 or more employees) and 52 percent of small (worksites of less than 100 employees) offer flexible breaks and flexible work options for expression of breast milk. 66 percent of large and 30 percent of small employers comply with the law and provide a private on-site lactation room.

Technical assistance
About a quarter (24 percent) of Minnesota companies received technical assistance in the area of worksite wellness. Broken down by size, 44 percent of large employers (worksites of 100 or more employees) or more and 22 percent smaller employers (worksites of less than 100 employees) received technical assistance. Sources used for technical assistance included:

- Insurance companies (49 percent)
- Benefits/Human resources consulting firms (17 percent)
- Insurance brokers (12 percent)
- Professional associations for Human Resources managers (6 percent)
- Trade associations (2 percent)

Story: Containing health care costs and increasing morale
At TEAM Industries in Bagley and Park Rapids, because of their worksite wellness program employees have lost weight, quit smoking, and improved morale, while enjoying no increase in health premiums for 2013.

With less than one out of five smaller employers having worksite wellness programs but seven out of eight open to the idea, smaller employers present a good opportunity to increase wellness in the workplace.
Recommendations

The survey presents some useful data revealing opportunities for worksite wellness and health improvement in Minnesota:

Find ways to support smaller employers
With less than one out of five smaller employers having worksite wellness programs but seven out of eight open to the idea, smaller employers present a good opportunity to increase wellness in the workplace.

Tobacco cessation as a priority
The percentage of companies reporting that they promote cessation services was low. Employers need to increase awareness and the value of services available through their insurance carriers or, in the absence of insurance, Minnesota QUITPLAN.

Nutrition in a machine
Since machines are the most common method that employers use to provide food at the worksite, making vending machines a source of healthy food choices is an important and effective way to encourage healthier eating.

Making the business case for breastfeeding
With only 13 percent of worksites with written policies regarding breastfeeding, it appears employers may not be aware of the benefits of supporting breastfeeding in the workplace. Presentations such as "The Business Case for Breastfeeding" and supplying support materials may be helpful for managers and employees.

Technical assistance from a public health perspective
Only one in four Minnesota employers receives technical assistance for worksite wellness, and over half of that technical assistance comes from insurance companies and insurance brokers. While these industries are well aware of costs associated with employees who have health problems, they are not necessarily able to approach worksite wellness from a prevention point of view. Public health is well-positioned to offer prevention-based worksite wellness that focuses on healthier employees and work environments.

Story: Downs Food Group encourages wellness for their employees

Downs Food Group’s poultry processing plant located in Watonwan County has instituted a variety of health conscious changes that improve nutrition, reduce smoke exposure, and increase physical activity. Workplace wellness programs are critical in any working environment, but at DFG it was especially important. Many DFG employees are from migrant or immigrant communities (80 percent Latino and 10 percent Asian) and have lower incomes, which puts them at greater risk for poor health outcomes.

More information: www.health.state.mn.us/worksite

---


9/2013