

Companies put focus on healthy employees

BY MARY SHEDDEN
The Tampa Tribune

Tampa Bay area businesses continue to jump on the wellness bandwagon, offering workers a chance to slim down on the job.

Escalating health care costs and increasingly large waistlines are the motivation behind programs that vary from weight-loss challenges to breaks on insurance premiums. Nearly 27 percent of all American adults are obese, and thus at risk for heart disease and other complications.

Robert Sanchez, a cardiologist and board member of the American Heart Association Tampa Bay, says patients eat better, exercise more and are healthier when they get support.

"This is not only about the individual," says Sanchez, of Northside Hospital in St. Petersburg. "We as a community and society have an imperative to help our citizens lead a healthier life."

Rhea Law, chief executive officer of the Tampa law firm Fowler White Boggs, says the firm instituted onsite wellness programs and health incentives five years ago to combat insurance claims related to hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol.

"(Companies are) going to spend that money on insurance and claims costs," says Law, whose firm was named a Platinum Start! Fit Friendly Company by the Heart Association this year. "Wouldn't they be better off to see their employees healthy and happy?"

The program goes beyond replacing doughnuts with fresh fruit in the office kitchen on Fridays, Law says. About 80 percent of the firm's 400 employees voluntarily participate in body mass, cholesterol and blood pressure checks, and 75 percent receive free one-on-one health coaching. Employees who stay healthy get insurance premium discounts.

The firm has not saved money, but the annual increase in health care

costs is half the yearly 10 percent to 12 percent jump companies across the nation report, Law says. Employee absenteeism and overall morale also improved.

Florida Communications Group, which owns The Tampa Tribune and TBO.com, is among the local companies participating in the Fit Friendly program. FCG President John Schueler also serves on the local association board.

Workplace wellness programs have exploded in popularity over the last decade, primarily as employers attempt to reduce medical insurance costs. If discounts at local gyms or fitness challenges can reduce the financial burden of health care claims, companies will consider them.

"It's really scary to look at the last 15 years and the escalating costs and increases in obesity," says David Roddenberry, co-founder of Healthy Wage.com, an online network that is offering \$18,000 in cash prizes in a "Florida Matchup" weight-loss competition that launches next month.

Suncoast Hospice and the Polk County Board of County Commissioners are among the local companies participating in the Healthy Wage corporate challenge. Individual teams of five also can compete.

For more information about the competition, visit www.healthywage.com/Florida-Matchup.

Details about the Start! Fit Friendly Company program are available at <http://ffc.heart.org/> or by calling (727) 563-8114.

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