

Benefits of good health

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Pilot program boosts employee health and saves money for city.

In January, 30 Garland, Texas, employees began a six-month program aimed at improving their overall health conditions and saving money on health care benefits. With the help of a nurse practitioner and weekly meetings, the participants lost nearly 800 pounds and improved other health problems to generate an annual average savings of nearly \$700 each for the city.

In the last few years, Garland has taken several steps to control rising healthcare costs for the city and its employees, including opening a City Care Clinic in April 2003 where employees and their dependents can get basic health services at no out-of-pocket cost. To further reduce employees' medical costs, the city decided to try to eliminate some health problems among employees. In July 2004, the city began working with its health insurance company, Bloomfield, Conn.-based Cigna Healthcare; its benefits consultant, Birmingham, Ala.-based McGriff, Seibels and Williams; and local nurse practitioner Marcia Upson to create a Wellness Initiative Pilot Program that would help employees establish healthier lifestyles.



The participants began the pilot program on January 16, 2005. Each went to the City Care Clinic for a physical exam and blood tests, and the group began meeting each Thursday at lunch to discuss eating habits, nutrition, exercise and preventive healthcare options.

During the program, the participants learned to practice healthier lifestyles without giving up their favorite foods. "Probably the most eye-opening thing I learned was about the difference between true hunger and appetite," says Craig Barnes, human resources analyst, who lost 64 pounds during the program. "It was amazing to learn that I could still have Mexican food, if I would wait until I was truly hungry, then take the time to eat it slowly and really enjoy it."

The basic ground rules for the group were: Only eat when you are truly hungry; chew very slowly and allow yourself to really taste your food; eat for 10 minutes, then pause for a five minute break before continuing; and, take at least 20 minutes to eat a meal. For the first three weeks of the program, everyone was asked to avoid sweets and sugary foods. Participants also were encouraged to exercise and to drink eight to 10 glasses of water each day.

After four months, participants had a second set of tests that revealed they had lowered their cholesterol levels an average of 20 points, while lowering their blood pressure readings an average of 10 points. By the time the program ended on June 23, the group had shed a total of 764 pounds. Several participants have reduced or eliminated diabetes or hypertension medication, and they reported less indigestion and higher self-confidence and energy levels. As a result of the health improvements, the city is saving \$358 per employee per year in medical claims, \$168 in prescription claims and \$157 in absenteeism for a total of \$683. "In theory, investing in a healthier workforce should reduce the overall cost of providing healthcare benefits," says Benefits Manager Rick French.

In September, the city began offering a 10-week program to 40 employees modeled on the pilot program. Upson holds two weekly classes for 20 participants and will begin a third weekly class in January, boosting participation to 60 employees for the next session.

As for the pilot program participants, they will be able to attend the new classes for "refreshers" while offering inspiration to the newcomers. "Some of us knew each other before, but many did not," says French, who lost 35 pounds during the program. "We now have this wonderful new family, and we want to help each other continue to set and reach new wellness goals."

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