

EMPLOYEE WELLNESS / BEST PRACTICES

TO YOUR HEALTH



Wellness assessment programs can lead to healthier workers, less expense for companies

By Karen Mracek

John Sadler got a phone call that shocked him, and made him proud at the same time — it was an employee thanking him for saving his life.

The co-owner of Sadler Co. had helped to implement a health risk management program for the company's more than 100 employees — one that helped this employee avoid a heart attack.

While the company is not even two years into the program, he feels like it has been worth the investment.

"If we save one person from having a heart attack, and our cost for the program is \$25,000, than that's worth it," Sadler said.

Sadler Co. isn't the first to implement a health wellness plan for employees. More and more businesses are looking for ways to combat the rising cost of health care.

Insurance premiums increased an average of 9.2 percent last year, more than three times the growth in workers' earnings and two-and-a-half times the rate of inflation, ac-

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According to the Kaiser Family Foundation/Health Research and Educational Trust's 2005 Annual Employer Health Benefits Survey.

For Tom and John Sadler, owners of Sadler Machine Co. and Sadler Power Train in Cedar Rapids, the decision to implement a health screening program wasn't solely about costs.

"It was something new, but we've always thought the wellness of our employees was important," John Sadler said.

Sadler Co. contracted with CarePro Health Services of Cedar Rapids after Cindy Larkin, human resources director, learned about the program at a meeting of the Eastern Iowa Human Resources Association.

They signed up for a wellness program that offered a



Nick Miller, a welder at Sadler Machine Co. in Cedar Rapids, works on a track frame for a Cedar Rapids Inc. paving machine. Sadler implemented a wellness screening program at the company to improve workers' health and cut down on health-care expenses. Mark Tade photo/The Edge

health screening of employees for diabetes, cardiovascular disease and metabolic syndrome. It included a pre-screening meeting with employees, screening and consultation for employees and an employer report.

Under the program, employers don't receive information about specific employees. Instead, employers receive aggregate results about their employees as a whole, so they can identify areas to focus on.

"There are risk factors that

come up, that they aren't aware of," said Jessica Mathes, Health Risk Management program coordinator for CarePro Health Services.

After the screenings were completed, 14 employees were invited to participate in a Disease State Management program, which consisted of monthly one-on-one meetings between a CarePro pharmacist and the employee — paid for by Sadler.

FROM 4

"It's about holding someone accountable," said Chris Nichols, sales and marketing director for CarePro. "They know they have to report back to someone."

While the savings for Sadler have yet to be fully realized by the company, research has shown that for every \$1 spent on a program like this, the employer can expect a return of \$4 in medical cost savings in three years.

Some savings come as actual costs and some are much harder to measure. A healthy employee typically has greater productivity, fewer sick days and less stress.

CarePro also has implemented the program for its own employees.

"It helps us to identify what problems the employers have," Nichols said.

For general issues that are evident in the employee group as a whole, CarePro offers a

Lunch-N-Learn program that tackles health education. Employers also can offer assistance through walking programs, flu shot immunization, headache management programs and a dermaview skin evaluation.

"People seem to be more conscious of their health now," Larkin said.

Health incentives

Companies have long offered free access to risk-assessment tools, but few workers used them.

"When no incentive is offered, our clients have a participation rate of 20 percent or lower," said Jennifer Murphy, health-care communications leader at Hewitt Associates, a Lincolnshire, Ill., human-resources services firm. "If they do offer some kind of incentive, or penalty, they see far more participation, sometimes as high as 90 percent or more."

Sadler was able to get a high participation rate without

incentives. They had a 92 percent participation rate in the first year.

"I think it has to come from within," Sadler said.

Mathes said workers at Sadler really took advantage of this benefit their employers were offering.

CarePro's Health Risk Management program is modeled after the Asheville Project, which began in 1996 in Asheville, N.C.

A self-insured employer, the city sought to provide education and personal oversight for employees with chronic health problems such as diabetes, asthma, hypertension and high cholesterol.

Employees with these conditions were teamed with community pharmacists who made sure they were using their medications correctly.

"The pharmacist component brings it to a difference level of care," Nichols said.

The project resulted in a system in which pharmacists developed thriving patient care

services in their community pharmacies, with lower total health care costs, fewer sick days and increased satisfaction.

"We are giving the patients the resources they need to be well," said John Miall, a consultant for the American Pharmacists Association and former director of risk management for the Asheville program, who spoke to the Eastern Iowa Human Resource Association last month.

The result of the first five years of that project was a 58 percent reduction in health care costs from what was projected, sick time cut in half and workers' compensation claims falling dramatically.

The project was started from scratch in Asheville, but here in Iowa, programs like CarePro already are available to employers.

"The infrastructure is already here," Miall said. "You are uniquely positioned to take wellness to the next level."



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