

MANAGED CARE

OUTLOOK

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Business Leaders, Health Experts Launch “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities”

Good health is good for business. That is the sentiment behind “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities,” an employer-community collaboration that is being led by the Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) with support from a variety of sources, including the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Clinton Foundation, the Institute of Medicine, the Hope Street Group, and the Samueli Institute.

Studies have shown that there is a direct link between good health and health care costs and job performance/productivity, and companies are taking notice. All across the country, companies have stepped up their efforts within the workplace to improve the health and wellbeing of their employees, but many are beginning to recognize that health and wellness goes beyond programs within the workplace; health and wellness extends into the community.

“Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” is an initiative based on the belief by business and health experts that improving community health will advance current and future business priorities. The organizations involved in this initiative are collaborating with HERO to define the most effective path toward this goal.

“The first step in this process was to zero in on why exactly it is so important for Corporate America to play a more active role in community initiatives and then identify what is already being done in this area,” notes Nico Pronk, vice president and chief science officer

for HealthPartners and co-chair of the “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” committee. “To do so, we conducted an environmental scan that was commissioned and funded by the Institute of Medicine Roundtable on Population Health Improvement.¹ Through this process, we learned that there are actually many efforts already underway, but unfortunately, many of those efforts are isolated, with limited communication between organizations and limited sharing of data. We wanted to take it a step further and create a more collaborative atmosphere in which organizations could work together to build healthy communities and, in turn, healthier workplaces.”

The “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” initiative recently brought together business and health care thought leaders for a kick-off event that was co-hosted by HERO and HealthPartners. During this meeting, health and business leaders worked to identify a collective mindset around the business benefit for employers in advancing health at the community level and the perspective that achieving health objectives (such as reducing obesity, improving physical activity, and managing chronic disease) will be very difficult without the business community's active engagement. The significance of health improvement as a factor of business success and a need to understand the elements of the business case are becoming increasingly clear to many stakeholders.

“Initially, we were able to put together a committee of around 25 people representing



a wide range of organizations — health plans, vendors that provide wellness programs, universities, small companies, large companies, multi-nationals,” explains Pronk. “The goal was to bring together organizations that understood the importance of improving health in the workplace and were committed to making that happen. In the middle of that work, we received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which led to a meeting of roughly 60 executives from the public and private sectors, all of whom share the vision of a healthier workplace, healthier community.”

Early on, there were two main questions that had to be answered, acknowledges Pronk. One,

what are the strongest elements for a business case that a company could leverage to establish itself as a leader in terms of community health initiatives? And two, what kind of barriers stand in the way of accomplishing that?

“One thing we identified early on as a barrier was the lack of metrics,” stresses Pronk. “There is this need not only for common definitions so that you can actually create metrics but also the need for those metrics to be developed in a way that speaks to business. Going forward, having a healthy workforce will be an important factor from an investment perspective because healthier workplaces are linked to better productivity, and companies will need to be able to show how well they are doing — not just from

a financial perspective but also from a health perspective. To do that, we need metrics.”

Clear communications are also a must, continues Pronk. “We have to be able to articulate a business case that is clear and concise and packs a powerful message. If it takes too long to explain to a CEO why it is important, that could be a deal breaker, so we have to be able to communicate in a way that cuts through quickly and with meaning.”

There has to be a shared set of values and a shared vision of what is important, adds Pronk. This can be difficult to achieve across an entire community when there are so many different viewpoints. There may also be language barriers and trust issues. These, too, must be addressed.

“When you say ‘community health,’ it sounds very simple, but it is actually quite complex,” says Pronk. “How do you go about setting a vision that is large enough to meet the needs of an entire community but still remains doable? You have to think outside the box, which is exactly what we are trying to accomplish with ‘Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities.’ We have to remove the boundaries of home and work; by doing so, we can change the landscape of things — within the workplace as well as the community as a whole. A healthier company is a more productive company, and a more productive company is good for the community. Everyone benefits when health becomes the bridge between where people live, work, and play.”

The next phase of the initiative is to disseminate what has been collected thus far to a broader audience, notes Pronk. Much of the dissemination will be done initially through the HERO Web site [www.the-hero.org], but a dedicated Web site for “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” is underway and expected to launch in early 2015. This initiative, however, is more than just a Web site, Pronk adds. “The idea

is to partner with organizations to make sure the information housed in that Web site is used effectively to bring about change. We are working not only with the IOM population health roundtable but also the obesity solutions roundtable, a CEO innovation collaborative, care community collaboratives, and others — all in an effort to get a dialogue started about what needs to happen next. It’s not enough to simply put the information out there; we have to take it to the next level.”

Input from business leaders will be used to shape and create a repository of information about investing in health and the community, along with a roadmap and related tools and resources that will provide the business case and clear path forward for companies that see the business value in committing to community health. The online resources are expected to be available in 2015.

HERO is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to the creation and dissemination of employee health management research, education, policy, strategy, and leadership. HERO was established in 1996 as a not-for-profit, 501(c)3 corporation to create high-quality employee health management (EHM) research, especially that dealing with the impact of modifiable health risks on health care costs. To learn more, visit www.the-hero.org.

In addition to funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, HERO received support/assistance from HealthPartners; the Federal Reserve Banks of Dallas, Minneapolis, and San Francisco; the Clinton Health Matters Initiative; Hope Street Group; BSR (Business Social Responsibility); Samueli Institute; the Blue Zones Project by Healthways; and the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index. ■

Endnote:

1. The IOM environmental scan report summarizes the current state of employer-community health and includes interviews with thought leaders, a review of published research studies, and business considerations for committing company resources to community health.

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