Don’t think you can attract thousands of plan participants to a health fair? The author and other leaders of Minneapolis-area health and welfare funds have done it. He shares tips to planning an event that will motivate and educate participants.
What do you think of when you hear the words “health fair?” There are many different visions of what a health fair looks like, but it’s not likely most people would immediately picture 5,300 plan participants filling a major league baseball stadium for an entire Saturday.

But that is exactly what happened at this year’s LaborCare Health Fair. On May 5, members of six multiemployer health and welfare funds spent the entire day meeting with high-quality health care providers at Target Field in Minneapolis, home of the Minnesota Twins. These members received biometric screenings, body fat analyses and lung-function tests and spent time speaking with health coaches and asking questions of onsite pharmacists and physicians, to name just a few activities. This was a health fair of epic proportions.

How did we get here, what makes a health fair well-attended and what makes it successful? This article tries to answer those questions and provide a roadmap for designing and implementing a successful health fair.
A Little History

The 2012 LaborCare Health Fair was not the first. Six years ago, a single fund—the Twin City Pipe Trades Welfare Fund—started the health fair with 450 attendees. That was a great start.

In the second year, the fund worked closely with the apprenticeship programs to promote the fair to younger members and make sure they understood this was a family-friendly event. More than 1,000 members attended the second fair. Leaders from a number of other building trades unions were invited as guests to see if they would be willing to band together in future years to help make the event bigger and better for those attending. We did this based on the reality and in the belief that “health is health” and that “we can do more together than we can apart.”

In other words, promoting health for a pipefitter, a plumber, a bricklayer, a cement mason or an electrician is going to encompass the same topics, medical testing and health care providers.

After attending the fair and seeing how active and engaged the members were, five additional funds—the Minnesota and North Dakota Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Health Fund, the Minnesota Cement Masons Health and Welfare Fund, the Minnesota Laborers Health and Welfare Fund, the St. Paul Electrical Workers and the Rochester Plumbers and Steamfitters—embraced the health fair concept. With additional groups on board we were able to leverage the size of our memberships and grow the fair to 4,000 members in the third year, 4,500 in the fourth year, 5,000 in the fifth year and 5,300 this year.

The Big Picture

First and foremost, the event should be member driven, meaning it should be focused on the member. Members should be involved from the very beginning. Initially, the idea for the health fair was floated and discussed in member focus groups. The Twin City Pipe Trades fund surveyed a mix of apprentices, retirees, spouses and active participants to get their views and ideas on a number of initiatives. A health fair was on the top of everyone’s idea list.

Second, “begin with the end in mind.” Answer the question: What do we hope to accomplish? The goal this year was for every member attending the fair to change one thing in his or her life to improve that member’s health. The fair’s motto was FAME, standing for fun, activation, motivation and education.

The first attempt at anything new can be scary. The following tips can help a fund and its participants achieve success with a health fair.
The Details: Tips for a Successful Fair

In discussing the details of what makes a health fair successful, organizers of the LaborCare fair came up with a top-ten list of details and takeaways that help make a health fair successful:

1. Establish a sense of urgency. Make the case for why a health fair is important and valuable. That shouldn't be too hard based on the following:
   — Rising health care costs
   — Chronic conditions
   — Diabetes and obesity
   — Tobacco use

2. Create a group of leaders committed to making a change.
   — LaborFair leaders came from six Taft-Hartley welfare funds that were tired of the status quo and wanted to make a difference.
   — Put together the planning team, made up from the fund leadership, and set a meeting schedule. The LaborFair group met monthly.
   — Keep the forum open, with honest discussion; allow for brainstorming.
   — Aligned thinking around health, along with passion and great energy, will emerge.

3. Leverage this leadership group. Commitment to the event by this group is critical.
   — It is important that dedicated leaders report back to the other trustees and the membership on progress before the event and about outcomes after the event.

4. Develop a vision and a strategy.
   — Branding, logo and information surrounding the marketing of the event. See www.lchealthfair.com for examples.

5. Develop a communication strategy.
   — Select a date for the event and then back up to the current date, selecting communication milestones along the way.
   — Among the ways to communicate are save-the-date cards, newsletter articles, a reminder mailing, e-mail blasts, website updates and member surveys following the fair.

6. Make sure you have the right venue.
   — Start with something comfortable. The Twin City Pipe Trades used its training center for the first year because it was a place members were used to coming to and was large enough for that first year. Subsequently, the fair moved to the Minneapolis convention center and then to Target Field.
   — Allow for online registration ahead of time or a postage-paid return card to get an idea of how many to expect. You may need to accommodate a lot of people and sponsors.

7. Create a budget early and stick to it.
   — The venue, pipe and drape, prizes, healthy snacks, printing and postage are a few of the major cost

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**takeaways >>**

- The LaborCare Health Fair grew from 450 participants attending the first year to 5,300 attending the sixth year.
- Several funds joining together to put on a fair makes it a more attractive to the health care providers and vendors.
- A group of committed leaders is critical.
- A fair should be promoted as a family-friendly event and have something for everybody.
- Although prizes aren’t a focus, they help draw members to the fair and engage them.
- A health fair motivates and educates members and is a chance to launch programs for the new year.

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items. Calculate the cost and get a commitment from each fund on a pro-rata share contribution.
— Once the budget is established, partner with quality medical providers in the area that will pay to participate in the event.
— The more that is raised in sponsorship, the less the funds will have in direct costs. The last two years there have been no out-of-pocket costs to the welfare funds for putting on this event. The cost of the event was covered fully by the sponsorship of quality medical providers!
— Find a partner to help with fund-raising and event management. These may or may not be the same entity.

8. Make the fair a family event with something for everyone.
— Health topics geared specifically for men, women and children
— A children’s area with games and activities to engage kids in fun and learning
— Make the event interactive. Providers are not allowed to simply hand out a brochure; they must come up with ways to engage the membership and present it to the planning committee. The providers will amaze you with their creativity. In addition to the various screening tests, we had health care quizzes, putting contests, interactive video games and a ten-foot-high, 20-foot-long inflatable colon that attendees could walk through to learn about colon cancer screening.
— Provide biometric screening tests that allow for tangible outcomes—blood pressure, BMI, cholesterol, glucose, etc.

9. Use prizes. Although prizes aren’t the focus, it’s a fact that prizes draw people to an event and, depending on how members become eligible for prizes, can help support engagement with vendors and providers at the fair.
— In addition to providing financial support, have vendors also provide prizes.
— Focus on healthy prizes (workout equipment, gym discounts, etc.) if possible or desirable prizes (iPads, flat-screen TVs, trips, etc.) to draw attention and attendance at the fair.

10. Create an early win. Make it a fun day—one that will be remembered by those in attendance, so they will come back again next year and will be excited to tell their co-workers all about it.
It’s important to remember that a health fair is not a one-time endeavor. Each year do your best to take feedback and constructive criticism, ask for members’ opinions, be honest with yourselves about what worked and what didn’t work, make changes and adapt. The fair will grow and grow.

A health fair is a great way to motivate, educate and pull all of a fund’s wellness programs together once a year. It shows that the fund is committed to making a difference in the lives of its membership and gives them the tools to make changes in their lives and the lives of their family members. It provides a venue to summarize the last year and launch programs into the new year. It’s a great setting for the fund to engage with members, spouses and children in a different way than anything else it has done.)

James J. Hynes is executive administrator of the Twin City Pipe Trades Service Association in St. Paul, Minnesota. The association is a nonprofit corporation that provides administrative services to pension and welfare trusts in the piping industry. Hynes is responsible for the overall administration of the benefit funds’ day-to-day operations. He is also a member of Minneapolis Pipefitters Local #539 and is a certified instructor of journeymen and apprentices in the plumbing and pipefitting industry. Hynes serves on the board of directors of Gillette Children’s Hospital and served on the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. He is a past member of the Actuaries and Consultants Committee for the International Foundation for Employee Benefit Plans.