Only a few years ago, a workplace wellness program sometimes was a leap of faith. Program champions believed but often couldn’t show definitively that getting people to stop smoking, lose weight and exercise would pay off in lower premiums and a healthier workforce.

Measuring return on investment of wellness programs can still be a challenge. But Bill Howard, director of the Civil Service Employees Association Employee Benefit Fund (EBF) in Latham, New York, can point to six years’ worth of savings—and a fitter, happier member service staff—proving that data-driven wellness initiatives pay off in more ways than one.

As of 2015 the EBF, with a staff of 62, had realized a savings of more than $285,000 on its health insurance premiums as a result of a $78,000 total investment in wellness, Howard said. EBF administers dental, vision and other negotiated benefits for about 265,000 public employee union members and their dependents in New York State. He credits the EBF board of trustees and its chairman, (former International Foundation Board member) Danny Donohue, for supporting the fund’s efforts and making the investment.

“Our first health fair was in 2011, and we have done it every year since, at roughly the same time, usually in February or March,” Howard said. The most recent health fair was on January 29. Almost every EBF staff member plus four dependents, about 65 people, participated.

The health fair is held at the fund office in conjunction with a local hospital and is done at no cost to the EBF. “It’s a value-added benefit from the EBF’s health partner, Capital District Physicians’ Health Plan (CDPHP).” CDPHP has been the fund’s insurance carrier since 2009, Howard said.

After getting their screening results and reviewing them with a health professional, staff members can compare their personal data on weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides, blood glucose levels and body mass index (BMI) from one year to the next and trace their improvement over the years.

“From a personal standpoint, it’s powerful to have multiyear results.”
Howard said. For example, his own cholesterol was too high—at 263—in 2011. It has come down each year because of his overall weight loss of 75 pounds. Exercising has been shown to affect triglyceride readings, and Howard has seen a big improvement in his own levels over the past few years. Howard has kept off the weight for more than three years by incorporating exercise and healthier diet choices into his daily life.

Although it can be hard to express to employees how their health status affects the fund's costs, “they get it. They love the benefit, and they want to do all that they can to retain their current level of coverage with CDPHP,” Howard said. Staff members “have the attitude that whatever they can do from a personal standpoint, they will. They have a real interest in helping us to control costs.”

Two years ago when the fund reviewed its experience data with CDPHP, the numbers showed considerable cost associated with staff going to emergency rooms (ER) for routine health issues. The EBF worked with CDPHP and its broker to develop an informational campaign that has dramatically reduced ER visits by encouraging fund staff to go to the urgent care facilities provided by CDPHP’s network for non-emergencies. The fund saw a 40% reduction in ER visits over the two-year period.

Howard described the fund’s success in an article in the September 2011 Benefits Magazine, about a year after the EBF began participating in the shared health program offered by CDPHP. The program, a partnership between the carrier and its policyholders to reduce and control costs, involves intensively monitoring participant health, promoting workplace wellness and educating employees.

Biometric results from the 2011 health fair were so impressive that premiums did not go up at all that year. Premiums increased less than 4% in 2012. They went up 9% in 2013 and were capped at a 9.9% increase in 2014, consistently below national rates and market rates in New York. Throughout that time period, premiums were rising between 14% and 16% per year in the state. And for the EBF, about 3% of the increases experienced were attributed to Affordable Care Act requirements that were beyond the fund’s control.

Those results are in stark contrast to what had been happening to the fund’s premiums a few years earlier. Before the data-driven wellness efforts began, the EBF had such a poor claims experience that Howard, the then-new director, was warned in 2009 that some area carriers were reluctant to bid for the health insurance contract. The EBF started its own wellness program about the same time it was seeking a new carrier, introducing Weight Watchers and walking programs. In 2010, CDPHP invited the EBF to help pilot a new shared health program that the Albany-based carrier had just launched.

Since then, Howard and others from the EBF meet quarterly with CDPHP staff to look at generalized biometric data as well as claims and pharmaceutical use data. “The bulk of our problematic claims fall into three broad areas—adult onset diabetes, cardiac and pulmonary,” Howard said. “We have tried to tailor our wellness offerings to specifically address the areas identified by the claims analysis. It is important to let the claims data help determine the types of wellness programs that are best suited to the needs of your workforce.”

Wellness initiatives are designed around what the fund hopes to accomplish to improve its claims experience. For example, weight has been a concern from the beginning. Howard said the Weight Watchers program has been very successful. Staff lost a total of 877 pounds after 45 weeks of a program that began in March 2010. After 59 weeks, 20 EBF staff had lost more than 1,300 pounds. In 2014, 27 EBF staffers lost a total of 331 pounds with the program.
The most successful weight-loss program, however, was a fitness/strength training initiative that EBF arranged through a local fitness studio in 2012. EBF negotiated a significant discount on a program that allowed three staff members at a time to work out with a certified fitness instructor. Employees were given work time to participate and applied their annual $300 wellness benefit to the membership fee. They also signed a contract to attend sessions twice a week. Of the 17 who participated, all but one met or exceeded his or her goal. The group lost a total of 92.8 pounds, had an average reduction of 5.4% of their body fat and saw an average loss of 2.7 inches around their waistlines.

“Some staff had never gone to a gym before and didn’t know how to safely lift weights or stretch,” Howard said. He noted that several of the participants continued with the gym at their own expense after the program concluded.

“We have consistently adjusted the program in response to where the data drives us,” he said, adding that more work remains to be done, especially with employees’ dependents.

CDPHP also provides classes each year on subjects such as stress management, back strength, exercises that can be done at a desk, smoking cessation and financial wellness. As part of the shared health program, the fund must offer at least three of the classes each year.

In 2013, the EBF’s major wellness initiative was a “DRIVE” challenge designed by fund staff. Each employee was given a bingo card with a number of activities. Upon completing 15 squares for activities such as completing a 5K run or walk, participating in Weight Watchers, joining a gym or giving up soda, employees received eligibility for a raffle prize. Howard said another challenge is being devised for this year.

He said that besides the cost savings, he has seen absenteeism go down. Two people on the staff smoke, compared with six who smoked when wellness efforts began, and those two are continuing to try to quit.

“We’re a member service organization,” Howard said. “I observe the way people treat our members on the phone every day and believe that our wellness efforts have greatly improved our operation. I hear staff sharing recipes from Weight Watchers and supporting each other. People are registering for races and walks and doing things they’ve never done before. One staffer recently organized a Catskill mountain hike. The guide who provided the service cooked a Catskill dinner at the end of the hike. Of that group of 12, only two or three of them had ever done anything like that before.

“We had a Christmas party here with all of the usual food offerings, and toward the end of the party I noticed that large groups of people had left the office to walk the four-mile walking loop we established. They could have been anywhere—finishing up shopping or eating more food—but they chose a good and healthy group four-mile walk. In such things, you can see the success of a solid wellness program.”

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