

what's working

making wellness convenient



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Every Wednesday evening, Susan Wood emerges from a yoga session feeling rejuvenated.

“There are days when you force yourself to go, and then at the end it’s almost like you’re euphoric,” said Wood, deputy chief manager of York Regional Paramedic Services. The sometimes-needed mental push is about the only hurdle to attending yoga class, because it’s held just one floor below in her office building’s cafeteria area. “It fits my lifestyle,” Wood said of the weekly after-work sessions.

Fitting the lifestyle of its nearly 4,000 employees is an essential part of the Regional Municipality of York’s nine-year-old, award-winning employee wellness program. From heavily discounted gym memberships to lunchtime yoga sessions to a weekly knitting group, the program seeks to reach as many employees as possible in a multitude of ways.

“It’s multidimensional. It’s not just focused on physical health, but it looks at personal health practices, organizational culture and also at occupational health and safety,” said Teresa DuCroix, manager, workplace health, safety and wellness, at York Region. “We are focused on primary prevention—stopping disease before it starts.”

York Region is an upper-tier municipality that includes nine local municipalities in the greater Toronto area. The region provides services including public transit, water, emergency management and public safety to the nine municipalities.

The wellness program is completely voluntary and incentive-based with a multisite focus because the region includes more than 50 different worksites. A 25-member volunteer wellness committee plays a crucial role “to help us ensure that the programming is delivered and that employees are aware of it no matter where they work,” DuCroix said.

Convenient access is particularly meaningful for employees in Wood’s department who work odd shifts and are on the go. Those employees benefit from an on-site fitness center in the paramedic services East Gwillimbury headquarters and other smaller touches like nutrition information cards in their work vehicles that may encourage them to make healthier choices when a drive-through order is their only meal option.

Highlights of the program include:

- **Annual spring fitness challenge.** Employees can participate as individuals or teams and earn points for daily exercise and other healthy activities like getting enough sleep and staying hydrated or posting pictures of themselves exercising. Prizes are awarded to the top team and individual competitors.
- **Health screening clinics.** Employees can participate in an annual “Know Your Numbers” cardiovascular screening clinic and the “Healthy You” screening clinic, which is similar to the cardiovascular screening but includes body mass index, body fat percentage and waist circumference.

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- **Worksite fitness/wellness programs.** Weekly yoga classes are offered at six worksites, and Zumba classes are offered at four for a fee. Employees have organized other groups that meet weekly for activities such as knitting, meditation and running.
- **Fitness discounts.** The region offers about 30 different discounts on gym memberships and programs like Weight Watchers. Employees can pay through payroll deduction. More than 600 participants participate in the GoodLife Fitness gym membership program alone.
- **Lunch-and-learns.** Topics have included diabetes management, financial workshops and empowering women.
- **Smoking-cessation program.** Provides up to \$500 to purchase smoking-cessation aids for participants who enroll in and complete the online program.
- **Wellness champions.** Employees are encouraged to nominate others for recognition on the wellness program website and newsletter. Nominees receive a certificate and a prize such as a healthy cookbook or water bottle.
- **Communication.** The program works to keep wellness top of mind for employees with biweekly Wellness Wednesday e-mails and a quarterly wellness newsletter. On-demand videos on the wellness website, www.york.bwell.com, also are promoted, targeting harder-to-reach employees.
- **Department-specific offerings.** Departments have the flexibility to implement their own programs. The paramedic department, for example, maintains a fruit and vegetable garden and recently started a peer support program.

The newest initiatives are:

- **Mindful Health.** Launched last fall, the program encourages participants to take responsibility for their health and make time for wellness in their day. It focuses on eight pillars such as nutrition, reduced alcohol consumption, physical activity and relaxation.
- **Mental health.** York Region is one of more than 25

employers in Canada participating in the Mental Health Commission of Canada's three-year research project tracking adoption of the new National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. The region is assessing what it already offers, and it's too early to identify any new programs, officials said.

"I think our wellness program is unique not only because we have a longstanding award-winning program here with diverse offerings, we also have really strong support from our chief administrative officer, Bruce Macgregor," DuCroix said.

That support is key to a successful workplace wellness program, she believes. It's also important to measure results to help to build a business case for investing in a program, she said.

York Region measures success through its corporate survey and prepares an annual wellness report that tracks participation. Estimates of cost avoidance vary, but in 2013, the region estimates it avoided almost \$11,700 in costs because of its cardiovascular screening clinics, \$8,500 through the Healthy You screening program and \$8,512 through the smoking-cessation program.

A knowledgeable staff person or experienced consultant is important to start a program, said Jennifer Lombardo-Seib, former corporate wellness specialist for York Region. She also suggested using outside resources such as local educational and nonprofit organizations or insurance providers to bolster wellness offerings.

A wellness committee also helps drive success. "Especially in a large organization that has multiple worksites, having people be champions at different worksites really helps to get the word out," Lombardo-Seib said.

Regular employee surveys help ensure programming remains relevant to employees, she added.

Wood agreed that giving employees input into the program is an important part of York Region's success. It gets people talking about the program. They believe their ideas matter and recognize that the region cares about them, she said. "People realize it's more than just a workplace."

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