

# benefit trends

## successful wellness initiatives

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**, and **Tyler Lloyd, GBA**

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic changed everything for the wellness program offered by The School District of Palm Beach County (SDPBC) in Florida—and for the better, according to Carlye Fabrikant, the district's wellness coordinator.

On the very first day of lockdown in March 2020, Fabrikant admitted that she was uncertain about how she would do her job or whether anyone could participate since wellness activities tend to rely on in-person involvement. But she quickly responded by creating virtual wellness programming for the SDPBC staff of 25,000. "Over the first year of the pandemic, we did 100 virtual workshops—all on different topics—and they loved it."



*"It seems like all staff are busier and busier, and people are not prioritizing their health in their spare time. The virtual offering allows them to be connected and doesn't take them away from their jobs."*

**Carlye Fabrikant**

Wellness Coordinator  
The School District of Palm Beach County  
West Palm Beach, Florida

Staff were hungry to make connections with others, and the virtual offerings continued as schools reopened and people returned to work. "Five years later, we're not doing as many virtual workshops, but it opened the door for what wellness could be," Fabrikant noted.

Wellness programs, like those offered by the school district, were the focus of *Workplace Wellness and Financial Education: 2025 Survey Report* from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of organizations responding to the survey said they provide wellness initiatives because they want to improve worker health and well-being and workplace culture, while only 28% of organizations said controlling/reducing health-related costs was their motivation.

The report reveals the most common wellness initiatives among corporations/single employer plans, multiemployer funds and public employer plans. Other topics covered include common barriers to success, strategies for measuring outcomes, wellness budgets and more.

### Top Initiatives

Wellness encompasses many facets of life, such as physical, emotional, social, work, financial and spiritual; therefore, the types of wellness initiatives organizations offer vary. Following is a look at the top three initiatives identified by survey respondents in several categories.

- Fitness and nutrition
  - Standing/walking workstations
  - Wellness competitions
  - Ergonomic training/supports, workstations
- Mental health
  - Mental health coverage
  - Employee assistance programs
  - Substance use disorder treatment coverage/benefits
- Health screening and treatment
  - Flu shots
  - Health screenings
  - Health risk assessments/appraisals
- Social and community health
  - On-site events/celebrations
  - Community charity drives/events
  - Community volunteer projects

### Successful Wellness Initiatives

Survey respondents were asked to identify their most successful initiatives as well as unique offerings, and responses ranged from traditional health fairs and biometric screenings to events such as gratitude bingo and tai chi over lunch.

### Virtual Support Groups

Virtual support groups have been the most successful effort for the SDPBC wellness program, Fabrikant said. The district has virtual groups that focus on a wide range of top-

ics or shared interests. For example, members of a pet lovers group share pictures and discuss their pets, and the district finds discounted pet services for them.

The SDPBC offered a virtual menopause support group during the 2024-25 school year that attracted 800 employees. The wellness program staff posted information such as workshops and community events, tips, motivating quotes and more. Group members received notifications of new information that they could check out when they had time.

For the 2025-26 school year, SDPBC will create a similar group called Aches and Pains that will focus on musculoskeletal issues and help make employees aware of all the district's resources.

### ***Incentivizing Telemedicine***

Free telemedicine has been the most successful wellness offering provided by the Georgia Bankers Association Insurance Trust (GBAIT), a multiple employer welfare arrangement (MEWA) that covers 15,000 participants and beneficiaries at member banking institutions. (Those enrolled in the association's high-deductible health plan (HDHP) are charged a copay for telemedicine visits.)

The trust partners with a wellness vendor to provide services that include telemedicine; virtual coaching; and services addressing mental health, nutrition, diabetes and more.



*"Our mental health treatment and health coaching has exploded the past two years."*

#### **Keri Brooks**

Chief Legal Officer  
Georgia Bankers Association Insurance Trust  
Atlanta, Georgia

The GBAIT has partnered with the wellness vendor since 2015 but began promoting free telemedicine services in 2017 to encourage people to try virtual care first before pursuing other higher cost options, such as the emergency room or urgent care. "Most of the time it saves money for the plan and saves them money too," said Keri Brooks, the association's chief legal officer.

Plan participants also have access to free virtual counseling if they access the benefit through the wellness provider.

**TABLE I**

### **Top Five Wellness Program Barriers\***

Difficult for workers to find enough time to participate	33%
Prohibitive costs	32%
Lack of interest by workers	26%
Difficult to keep momentum going	24%
Lack of dedicated wellness budget	21%

\*Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

This year, dependents ages 13-18 started also receiving the free counseling benefit, which has filled a need because the plan serves members across the state who may live in areas without providers who specialize in adolescent mental health.

### ***Activity Challenge***

A three-week activity challenge in which teams compete to accumulate the most steps is the most successful wellness initiative for Hubbard Broadcasting, Inc. The St. Paul, Minnesota-based company has about 2,000 employees at roughly 50 media stations in over 20 U.S. cities. Last year, 195 people signed up for the program, which has become a highly anticipated annual event, said Angela Subera, CEBS, the company's benefits manager.

Teams with names like School of Walk, The Pacemakers and Red Hot Chili Steppers vie for bragging rights in the activity challenge. Subera uses a third-party app to run the program, which is inexpensive and makes it simple for all locations to participate. Subera considers the program successful because of "the engagement and getting people excited about it. And we hear personal stories: 'This helped me kick off my weight loss,' or 'It helped me get outside more and be a part of my team.'"

### **Barriers to Success**

In the survey, organizations identified roughly 30 barriers they face in offering wellness programs. Approximately one in three mentioned difficulties for workers to find enough time to participate or prohibitive costs. About one in four mentioned lack of interest by workers or difficulty keeping momentum going. One in five cited the lack of a dedicated wellness budget or privacy concerns among workers as barriers (Table I).

Subera stressed that wellness activities can be successful even with a low budget, and she encouraged employers to keep trying even if an effort fails.

Offering virtual programs has helped remove some of the barriers for the SDPBC, Fabrikant said. “It’s been extremely beneficial, and we’ve saved money and we’ve saved time. We’re just more efficient in our work. It’s increased our engagement tremendously. Before, if I did a program and got 50 to 100 people, that was great. Now I have 800 people.”

The International Foundation report showed that 28% of respondents have leaders who actively participate in initiatives, and 19% have leaders who act as role models for prioritizing health and work–life balance. However, 19% said leadership is not aligned with the organization’s wellness initiative, and 18% said leaders do not participate in the wellness initiatives.



*“Sometimes you just have to try things and see what sticks. We tried a challenge that wasn’t very successful. It just didn’t get the engagement. It wasn’t the right moment. You have to be willing to try something different.”*

**Angela Subera, CEBS**  
Benefits Manager  
Hubbard Broadcasting, Inc.  
St. Paul, Minnesota

Gaining leadership buy-in can be a challenge for wellness programs, wellness leaders said. Brooks mentioned that some employers in the GBAIT plan don’t use the wellness services, despite the association’s promotional efforts. Some of the small banks have just a handful of employees who may not have the time to promote the service. “They feel it’s another thing they have to learn about and another thing they have to do,” she said.

Measuring Success

The International Foundation report showed that only a small percentage (14%) of organizations measure the return on investment (ROI) for their wellness programs. However, organizations use other metrics to evaluate their wellness activities as represented in Table II.

TABLE II

Data/Metrics Used to Track Wellness-Related Activities\*

Attendance and/or participation in wellness events	40%
Reports from health insurance company	32%
Reports from wellness vendor/company	31%
Worker surveys	21%
Database for workers to track wellness activities/participation	12%
Gamification incorporated into programs/initiatives	11%
Fitness tracker/app data	8%
Other	1%

\*Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Twenty-one percent of organizations do not collect information on wellness activities and participation.

At the SDPBC, participants must complete a survey following each event, which helps staff evaluate the effectiveness of programming. “We get 1,000 of those surveys each year to evaluate if we are doing the right thing,” Fabrikant noted.

The GBAIT looks at data, including urgent care and emergency room expenses, to evaluate program success as well as telemedicine surveys, which reveal where patients would have gone for care if they didn’t have access to telemedicine. The GBAIT estimates that it saved \$644,873 from January 1, 2023 through December 31, 2024 from the diversion of in-person care to telemedicine services.

About the Report

*Workplace Wellness and Financial Education: 2025 Survey Report* includes responses from 331 corporations/single employer plans, multiemployer funds and public employer plans in the United States. To download the report, visit [www.ifebp.org/workplacewellness25](http://www.ifebp.org/workplacewellness25).

