When patients come to one of Tenet Healthcare’s 80 acute-care hospitals, 18 short-stay surgical hospitals or 400 outpatient centers, Tenet wants them to feel surrounded by healthy doctors, nurses and other staff in a culture that values and delivers health.

But developing that culture has been an evolving ten-year effort that moved from wellness as a way to lower health care cost to wellness because it is the right thing to do for employees, said Thora Khademazad, Tenet’s director of culture programs.

Tenet has more than 125,000 employees—79% women with an average age of 44 and 21% men with an average age of 54. Its facilities are coast to coast in the United States and in the United Kingdom.

Tenet’s first health risk assessment in 2005 revealed employees had the same health problems as most employee groups. People didn’t eat enough fruits and vegetables or exercise enough. Stress levels were high. Medical claims cost was rising about 5% annually, exacerbated by employees being overweight and having high blood pressure or diabetes—controllable risk factors that could be improved with a healthy lifestyle.

“That’s who we were,” Khademazad said, “and we wanted a wellness strategy that would help bring health care costs down and improve the quality of life for our employees.”

In 2006, Tenet launched its first off-the-shelf program using an outside vendor. The activity-based program used a wellness credit system to encourage participation, and “it worked well because our people liked it,” she said. They enjoyed earning credits that added up to an incentive. However, “we wanted to customize the program and content to fit our population. After three years, we decided to do it ourselves, and we brought the wellness program in-house.”

In 2009, Tenet launched a popular, interactive HealthyatTenet website. Previously, wellness was separate from Tenet’s other benefit and retirement plans. Now, wellness and benefits were combined, with one website for easy access and to reinforce the idea that a person’s health and wellness affect his or her benefit costs. Employees liked the user-friendly wellness website so much that in 2011 the website incorporated all wellness and health benefits together with the retirement and financial benefits.

The move in-house decreased administrative costs considerably (with no more per-member-per-month pricing) and allowed for a flexible program design with custom content. Incentives increased over the next few years to a maximum of $600 annually in the form of a contribution to a health savings account. The new program offered improved communications and created a robust network of more than 400 wellness champions with a coordinator at each facility. Also, facilities with strong participation in the program could earn awards and money that could be used to encourage a culture of wellness—at their facilities. Award money was used to create on-site fitness facilities, for walking trails and for massage chairs for the staff lounge.

“The program really took off over the next three years,” Khademazad said. “We said, ‘This is working really well—Let’s change it!’

“Actually, we looked at the high participation but could not correlate participation back to an improvement in health risk or a decrease in health care costs. It was difficult to measure...
the program’s effectiveness. So in 2013 we changed the pro-
gram to an outcomes-based design.”

Incentives were lowered to a maximum of $400 for achiev-
ing healthy measures in four categories: blood pressure, cho-
lesterol, body mass index (BMI) and nicotine use. The tests
included a finger prick and nicotine cheek swab conducted
at on-site events, local labs or doctors’ offices. “I strongly sug-
gest giving people options, to make getting their screenings
as convenient as possible,” Khademazad said.

“It was a very different program than what we were used to,” she said. “We provided online and telephone coaching as
a reasonable alternative to earn incentives.”

The program rewards people who are healthy or are mak-
ing an effort to be healthy. But “who we were trying to catch
were the people we don’t know anything about—the ones
who don’t go to a doctor or get annual screenings.”

At the same time, Tenet expanded its view of wellness. Previ-
ously, there was a big emphasis on nutrition and fit-
ness. “But definitions of wellness are extremely broad,”
Khademazad said. “There is more to it than just the physi-
cal aspects. So we changed our program to reflect six dimen-
sions of wellness. Now, seminars and challenges cover topics
on emotional, social, environmental, financial and learning
. . . . The message was that ‘we want to make sure we’re sup-
porting you in all aspects of your life, not just at work, but
also at home with your families.’ ”

The new, expanded program launched in January 2013
with a “Random-Acts-of-Kindness” challenge, and “people
loved it.” Participants earned entries into drawings for valu-
able prizes like iPads, Apple Watches and gift cards by par-
ticipating in the wellness challenges and seminars.

Khademazad added, “People like prizes. It amazes me
what they will do for a granola bar, let alone an iPad.”

Tenet’s wellness trifecta is:
1. Get people engaged.
2. Make them accountable—Have them own it.
3. Use incentives.

Khademazad credits the wellness champion net-
work with getting employees engaged. “They know

Among Khademazad’s tips:
• Make websites fun. “We’ve noticed that everyone,
across all demographics, wants to have fun.” (In keep-
ing with efforts to keep the program fresh, Tenet is
coming out with a new website she thinks will be ex-
ceptional.)
• Interactive monthly newsletters and video graphics al-
low Tenet to send messages that are fun rather than
predictable. For example, one e-mail about incentives
used the subject line “cha-ching.”
• Keep e-mails “short and sweet”—no more than three
or four lines.
• A quarterly newsletter featuring a little eggplant as a

Earth Day: April 22

January 2016 Benefits Magazine
wellness guru has articles on things like sleep and the need to take a break, as well as healthy recipes.

Khademazad said the goal has been to change the way employees think and feel about work, which has required understanding the beliefs, values and assumptions that influence behaviors and looking at attitudes and lifestyles.

Creating a culture of health at Tenet has meant recognizing people don’t like corporate programs and would rather do things their own way. Khademazad said her staff recognized that employees tend to work in packs—especially nurses. Reaching them meant figuring out who the influencers are and having team competitions. Among this competitive group, “nobody wants to be at the bottom” of the leader board.

Khademazad suggested an organization considering a wellness program ask itself if the program is trying to achieve a return on investment (ROI), where saving money is the most important objective, or a value of investment (VOI) that tries to create a culture where people want to work.

“If you want ROI, it is important, but very hard, to keep the variables in your program consistent. You need consistency with your definition of wellness, with program design, benefit plan design, incentive structure, vendors and employees. We had just about all of those elements change during the last five years.”

Although an ROI had been hard to achieve, Tenet has seen good trends with its program participants. Employees who have participated consistently year over year have had fewer emergency room visits and shorter hospital stays.

“Participants in our program are improving their health. We have employees who are climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, doing runs and walks on their own, changing their eating habits and establishing work-life balance. Our culture is changing. Magic happens when you set up a platform that makes it fun for people to improve their health.”

by | Chris Vogel, CEBS