

Weight Loss Rewards Program Results In 600-lb Lost (in Less than 90 Days!)

Helping residents achieve and maintain good health practices is a common goal for many continuing-care retirement communities, but at Wesley Willows Corporation, educating employees about health and promoting weight management are also important to the corporation's leaders. Wellness programming dates back to 2001 for the Rockford, Illinois, employer, when Cathie Holmgaard, director of Human Resources, conducted her first employee wellness survey to determine the wellness wants and needs of the 260 employees.

The first fitness program began not long after, as employees began to support one another's efforts to become more active and healthier. The most popular program was the 30-30 Fitness Challenge, which has become an annual event. "Each April, May, and June, the Challenge is to exercise for at least 30 minutes, 30 times through that period, or 10 times per month," explains Holmgaard.

Participating employees mark their progress on floor-to-ceiling charts mounted on a wall so that their efforts are publicly acknowledged. Activities such as walking, running, bicycling, weight lifting, and even sweat-producing yard work qualify as exercise. At the end of the period, all participants receive an attractive T-shirt with the Wesley Willows logo, says Holmgaard. The average employee participation in this Challenge stays consistently at around 50 percent.

In January 2005, a Wellness Team was formed, and REACT, a 6-week program, was rolled out. "REACT stands for reduce stress, eat right, add activity, change body composition, and terminate smoking," Holmgaard explains.

In 2006, a Pedometer Program was added. Every employee received a pedometer and Holmgaard put maps

on the wall that showed how long it would take to walk to different towns. More than half of the staff actively participated.

Taking Control Of Weight Issues

This year, the emphasis has become weight management: getting weight within a normal range and/or keeping it there. Holmgaard notes that weight loss cuts down on the number of people suffering from Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, and often, high cholesterol. She reviewed several weight management programs and decided on the Tangerine Wellness Weight Management Program (www.tangerinewellness.com).

The Tangerine Program is based on a simple premise—employees receive rewards for losing weight. To begin the program, participating employees are confidentially weighed by a Tangerine nurse so they have a baseline/starting weight. Tangerine's approach to weight management is through employee self-tracking of calories online in addition to tracking weight loss. Reports to HR show weight loss (or gain for those staff members that are underweight) by team and participant totals.

The program has encouraged Wesley Willows employees to lose over 606 pounds so far in the 2½ months since it was initiated. Holmgaard and Wesley Willows President and CEO William T. Pratt are extremely pleased with the results. Pratt is participating in this program, as are the other members of senior management, adds Holmgaard.

There are 28 teams of four employees each. "The support system of team members and the natural competition between teams promotes success." The online, Internet-based environment allows participants to view results by team

Who: Wesley Willows Corporation (www.wesleywillows.org)

What: Initiated a weight management program as part of its wellness program offerings.

Results: In addition to losing weight, employees are learning about caloric intake and physical activity and their impact on weight management.

so they know where their team stands in overall weight loss; they can send e-mails to each other and post recipes and helpful hints through a bulletin board "community" for all participants in the program, explains Holmgaard.

The participants receive monetary rewards for weight loss on a quarterly basis, with the top five teams receiving a dollar amount for overall team weight loss, she explains. "My dietitian is against crash diets [and so are Holmgaard and Tangerine], so an employee will not receive a reward for losing over 10 percent of their body weight per quarter. Our weight loss goal is long term."

Results and ROI

"HR directors are challenged to show return on investment (ROI) for employee wellness programs," Holmgaard explains, noting that Tangerine's approach to showing ROI is "based on the premise that if people lose weight, health costs go down."

It's a little soon for Wesley Willows to show ROI in terms of healthcare or health insurance benefits costs going down, but already, there has been movement within the overweight and obese weight categories. For example, a report at 2 months showed that of 46 employees in the obese weight category at the program's initiation, 3 employees have lost enough weight to be reclassified into the "overweight" category.