

## Participating in the CDC's National Healthy Worksite Program

The leadership at United Way of Pierce County (UWPC) saw the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Healthy Worksite Program (NHWP) as a way to bring worksite wellness programs to its employees to align with the organization's community-impact areas of health care access and wellness. They wanted to lead by example and support UWPC's mission within their own organization.

UWPC applied principles of implementing a comprehensive health promotion program learned during the NHWP by putting in place a combination of programs, policies, and environmental supports to address multiple areas of employee health.

Despite their interest in the NHWP, UWPC leaders were not sure if they could apply the program's principles successfully because UWPC's Human Resources (HR) Department had only one staff member. They were also concerned about whether their staff would buy-in to the program and participate in its activities. They believed that working with organizations in their community with similar

goals would help build the momentum they needed to develop and put into place a successful and sustainable workplace health program.

Rebecca Zimmerman, UWPC's HR director, worked to get the organization accepted into the NHWP in 2013 and led the UWPC's wellness program at its outset. Zimmerman followed recommendations from the NHWP and recruited volunteers to form a small wellness team. Kelvin Ceasar, project manager for United for Military Families, a UWPC program that helps military families access services both on and off base, assumed primary responsibility for UWPC's fledgling wellness program about a year after the organization began working with the NHWP.

One of the first NHWP activities that UWPC completed was a baseline assessment of its employees' health in 2013. The assessment included employee surveys covering health conditions, healthy behaviors, and perceptions about the work environment, as well as biometric

## Organization Background

United Way of Pierce County

- « Established in 1953
- « Industry: Health Care and Social Assistance
- « Location: Tacoma, Washington
- « 25 Employees

United Way of Pierce County (UWPC) is a nonprofit community organization that provides education, resources, and opportunities to low-income families in Pierce County, Washington. It partners with local nonprofits, businesses, governments, and social service agencies to meet the community's most pressing needs. The organization is volunteer-driven and has a board of directors that represents many different sectors of the community, including labor, the military, nonprofits, and government. Its mission is "to work from the heart to unite caring people to tackle our community's toughest challenges."

screenings. Like all of the employers participating in the NHWP, UWPC also completed the [CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard](#), a validated organizational tool designed to help employers assess the extent to which they have implemented evidence-based health promotion interventions at their worksites.

## Setting Goals

The 2013 assessment showed priority areas based on the health risks most prevalent among UWPC's employees. The wellness team set goals and specific, time-bound objectives to ensure follow-through in two priority areas: nutrition and physical activity. These goals and objectives were as follows:

- Goal: Improve nutritional status of employees.
  - Objective: Increase the percentage of employees who eat the recommended daily allowance of fruits and vegetables by 12.5% by March 2015.
  - Objective: Reduce the percentage of employees who are at high or moderate risk for high cholesterol by 5% by March 2015. Cholesterol risk is calculated based on age, gender, blood pressure, smoking status, triglycerides, and high- and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels.
- Goal: Improve employees' physical activity levels.
  - Decrease the percentage of employees who get little or no physical activity by 10% by March 2015.

Members of UWPC's wellness team participated in all NHWP trainings and webinars that addressed the main developmental stages for a wellness program, which are assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Zimmerman and Ceasar also participated in monthly technical assistance calls with CDC staff to share updates, solve problems, get advice, and learn how to access resources (e.g., planning tools for campaigns that promote walking and stairwell use, model policies for public places).

After the NHWP training, the wellness team began to meet monthly, usually during lunch breaks. The team switched to quarterly meetings once initial program planning was complete.

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## Program Overview

### Multiple Strategies to Improve Nutrition

The wellness team focused UWPC's nutrition interventions on education, friendly competitions, policy change, and environmental supports. To educate employees about nutrition and healthy eating, UWPC developed a workplace wellness newsletter. The newsletter included wellness tips, including some compiled from staff members. From spring to fall, the wellness team promoted a weekly downtown farmers' market, located a half mile from the organization's office. The team encouraged employees to walk to the farmers' market together to buy healthy produce.

The team also adopted a policy to promote and provide fruits and vegetables for all organizational

*"The one 'aha' was around fitness. Our employees are a fairly mature group. They thought about wellness more broadly after [the NHWP]. Rather than doing more 'reps' or running, they thought about how they can treat themselves well."*

*—Kelvin Ceasar, Wellness Team Chair, UWPC*

meetings and UWPC-sponsored events. Team members reviewed the products offered in office vending machines and worked with the vendor to make healthier choices available. Now more than half of the items in the vending machines are "Fit Pick" items that meet current healthy nutrition standards and include healthy choices, such as green tea. UWPC also sponsored a healthy potluck meal and recipe exchange during the baseline and follow-up health assessments. Employees were able to sample healthy snacks after they completed the biometric screening.

### An Apple or Two a Day

The wellness team developed a month-long "UWPC Eat an Apple" challenge in February 2015. For each apple they ate during the month, participating

employees posted a paper apple with their name on it on a wall in the office. The winner received a trophy of a carved apple on a pedestal. Cesar reported that more than half of UWPC's employees participated. Peer pressure helped increase participation, and Cesar said employees enjoyed the challenge, and he believes it boosted morale.



UWPC's apple trophy.  
Photo provided by UWPC.

### Getting More Physical Activity at Work

The wellness team used several strategies to promote physical activity, such as walking groups and "active"

## Program Success

After finishing the NHWP in 2015, UWPC completed the CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard again as part of its follow-up assessment. UWPC nearly tripled its total ScoreCard score, from 67 points in 2013 to 195 in 2015, out of a possible 264 points. The organization made improvements in nearly every category, including its use of evidence-based interventions for nutrition and physical activity, cholesterol, stress management, and tobacco cessation.

Some examples of the evidence-based strategies UWPC received points for in its 2015 ScoreCard, that it did not have in place in 2013, included the following:

- Having a written policy or formal communication that made healthier food and beverage choices available in vending machines.
- Having a written policy or formal communication that made healthier food and beverage choices available during meetings when food was served.
- Providing environmental supports for recreation or exercise.
- Providing organized, group physical activity programs for employees.
- Providing free or subsidized, one-on-one or group lifestyle counseling for employees who were overweight or obese.

meetings at which employees are encouraged to walk and stand instead of sitting. A sign posted outside the Human Resources Office encourages people to "Put your best foot forward. Use the stairs."

### Helping Employees Reduce Stress

Although stress reduction was not a major focus of the first year of the wellness program, UWPC provided information and encouraged employees to take breaks during the day. The wellness team used the NHWP *Pierce County Worksite Health Community Resource Guide* to identify mental health resources for UWPC employees. During the holidays, the team asked for input from staff and provided resources and information on ways to reduce holiday-related stress.

- Providing work-life balance and life skills programs.

UWPC, like many other NHWP participants, made the largest gains in its score for the Organizational Supports module, which assesses the extent to which organizations have



UWPC's apple challenge wall.  
Photo provided by UWPC.

a foundation and infrastructure in place to support and maintain a workplace health promotion program. The 2015 ScoreCard score reflected that UWPC's wellness program now has an active wellness team, leadership support, and organizational commitment at all levels of management, and it is integrated into the organization's annual objectives. These improvements helped the wellness team become more focused in its efforts to meet its objectives. Although UWPC is a small nonprofit with limited resources, Cesar believes the changes noted in the ScoreCard have created an environment in which employees are more aware of health and wellness and more thoughtful about their day-to-day routine.

**CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard Overall Score  
in Wellness Programming, 2013-2015**



In 2013, a total of 24 UWPC employees completed the baseline health assessment. In 2015, a total of 25 employees completed the follow-up assessment, including 11 of the original 24.

UWPC achieved some but not all of its health objectives in the first 18 months of its wellness program. Specifically, the organization met its objectives for reducing the percentage of employees at high or moderate risk for high cholesterol. UWPC met its physical activity objective based on a much lower percentage of employees who were physically inactive in 2015 (36%) compared to 2013 (84%). When the data were analyzed for just the 11 employees who completed both health assessments, UWPC found that the percentage who were physically inactive dropped from 82% in 2013 to 46% in 2015. Although UWPC did not have a weight-loss goal, the percentage of employees in this subgroup who were obese dropped from 64% in 2013 to 55% in 2015.

For employees who have been diagnosed with high blood pressure or high cholesterol, keeping those levels in a healthy range usually involves lifestyle changes and taking medication. Increasing the number of employees who comply with their doctor's instructions to be treated with medication increases the number of employees with their conditions under control, reducing their risk for health problems and complications.

The following tables provide the percentages of employees with diagnosed high blood pressure and cholesterol and the percentages of those who are treating their conditions with medication. The percentage of UWPC employees treating diagnosed high blood pressure and cholesterol with medication

**2013 Employee Health Issues and Lifestyle Risks Profile  
(Employees = 24)**

<b>Self-Reported Health Assessment Survey</b>	
Eat at least 5 daily servings of fruits and vegetables	21%
Engage in little or no physical activity	83%
Health care provider diagnosed high cholesterol	13%
Health care provider diagnosed high blood pressure	21%
<b>Biometric Screening</b>	
Body Mass Index: % obese (BMI ≥30)	50%
High or moderate risk for cholesterol†	47%
Elevated blood pressure (systolic ≥140 mmHg or diastolic ≥90 mmHg)	13%

**2015 Employee Health Issues and Lifestyle Risks Profile  
(Employees = 25)\***

<b>Self-Reported Health Assessment Survey</b>	
Eat at least 5 daily servings of fruits and vegetables	8%
Engage in little or no physical activity	36%
Health care provider diagnosed high cholesterol	20%
Health care provider diagnosed high blood pressure	20%
<b>Biometric Screening</b>	
Body Mass Index: % obese (BMI ≥30)	42%
High or moderate risk for cholesterol†	43%
Elevated blood pressure (systolic ≥140 mmHg or diastolic ≥90 mmHg)	44%
<i>*Percentages include all employees who provided data in 2015, including those who did not complete the 2013 assessments.</i>	
<i>†Total cholesterol/high-density lipoprotein ratio ≥4.0.</i>	

stayed about the same from 2013 to 2015. (Note: These percentages are based on small sample sizes.) The assessments highlighted the need for more education to help employees understand the importance of taking their medication. As a result, UWPC plans to add these messages to its wellness program.



Percentage of UWPC Employees Who Agree or Strongly Agree with the Following Statements		
	2013	2015*
In this facility, management considers workplace health and safety to be important.	83%	100%
My supervisor is concerned about the welfare of those under him or her.	79%	90%
My employer has provided me with the opportunity to:		
Be physically active	33%	36%
Eat a healthy diet	33%	68%
Live tobacco free	43%	48%
Work Safely	67%	84
*Percentages include all employees who provided data in 2015, including those who did not complete the 2013 assessments.		

## Challenges

During the initial months of its wellness program, UWPC faced major organizational changes. In December 2013, its CEO retired, and several staff members subsequently left the organization. These changes created a hectic environment, and the wellness team was unable to meet for several months. The team eventually agreed to meet quarterly, but Ceasar said he would like the members to return to meeting monthly in the future.

Another challenge is the weather. In the Pacific Northwest, the weather is not always suitable for outdoor activities. It rains most days from September until spring. As a result, employees tend to be less active during the rainy months, and the goal of

staying healthy often gets lost. In addition, people who work in nonprofit social service agencies like UWPC are often intensely dedicated to their work. When they are working long hours to meet specific goals, they can forget to take care of themselves. For example, UWPC's development staff must meet an annual fundraising goal, and staff working in the community have to turn those resources into positive results to ensure the organization's sustainability. UWPC works to overcome the challenge of heavy workloads by making sure that health and wellness stay in the forefront of employees' minds and work. The staff members are a close-knit, supportive group, so if they see each other looking like they need a break, they will advise each other to take one.

## What's Next?

The improvements reported so far have become a rallying point for UPWC's wellness team. It plans to use what it has learned about past participation in wellness activities to get more staff members involved in the future. By drawing on its experience from the

first 18 months and using the data obtained during the NHWP, UWPC's leaders are confident that they can develop activities that will appeal to employees throughout the year, and that they can continue to improve UWPC's wellness program.



*The National Healthy Worksite Program was designed to help employers put into action science- and practice-based disease-prevention and wellness strategies that would lead to specific measurable health outcomes to reduce chronic disease rates. From 2013-2015, each participating employer received support, training, and technical assistance to put in place a combination of program, policy, and environmental interventions to support physical activity, good nutrition, and tobacco-use cessation.*