

City workers slim down to cut costs

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Leroy King stayed in shape most of his life practicing martial arts.

But as he aged and his family grew, the 37-year-old city employee began exercising less and eating more. Eventually his weight grew to 240 pounds.

"I just got to where I was sick all the time," Mr. King said.

But with the help of an employer-sponsored wellness program by the city of Chattanooga, the Parks and Recreation Department mechanic has turned his life around in the past 16 months.

After a visit to a city clinic revealed high blood pressure, sugar and cholesterol levels, Mr. King decided to take advantage of the city's Well Advantage Program. During his lunch hour, he began working with a dietitian and fitness trainer to improve his diet and exercise.

In less than a year, he shed 80 pounds -- one-third of his weight -- and cut both his cholesterol and blood sugar levels.

"I feel great now," he said during a visit to the fitness center the city built in a former Senior Neighbors garage downtown.

City Personnel Director Donna Kelly hopes to duplicate Mr. King's success with other Chattanooga employees, improving the physical health of the city's work force and the fiscal health of the city budget.

The city already has cut the growth in employee health care costs by developing its own city-operated pharmacy, fitness center and medical clinic, Ms. Kelly said. Next year, the city plans to expand the program by contracting with a Birmingham, Ala.-based company to offer more rewards to city employees with healthy habits.

"I think we're ahead of where a lot of employers are because the mayor and the council had a good-faith effort to allow us to get started," Ms. Kelly said. "I think it's incredible what the employees have done with their medical costs."

The city in-house pharmacy is projected to save the city \$8.5 million over the next three years by buying prescription drugs used by city employees at discounted prices.

At the city-operated pharmacy on 10th Street downtown, city employees and their dependents can obtain generic medication for \$2 for a 30-day supply and \$5 for a 90-day supply. While the patient can get their prescriptions filled at other pharmacies, the co-pays are much lower at the on-site center.

More than half of all city employees are now using the city's pharmacy to fill their prescriptions, officials said.

City employees also enjoy a free fitness center and classes for weight management, nutrition and smoking cessation. So far, more than 600 city employees have signed up for one of the exercise or wellness programs at one of two city fitness centers.

investing in wellness



Staff Photo by Tim Barber City employees Jean Smith, right, Janice Suttles and Ernie Meyer work out on the stationary bicycles at the Health and Wellness Center on East 10th Street.

The city of Chattanooga still spends \$24.7 million a year to provide health care for 8,500 city employees, retirees and their families. But officials credit the city's wellness program for helping to cutting out most of the annual double-digit increases in such costs experienced by other employers.

The city is spending more than \$1.7 million a year to operate its own pharmacy, contract with CareHere for medical clinics and staff its fitness centers. But Ms. Kelly said such expenses are more than made up for in the improved health and reduced treatment costs for city employees.

"For every dollar we spend, we conservatively estimate we'll get back at least \$6 in savings," she said.

The city also has provided cash bonuses of up to \$300 for employees who practice healthy habits. Next year, the city hopes to encourage even more such behavior through a contract with ChipRewards Inc.

The new program -- approved earlier this month by an 8-1 vote of the City Council -- will provide merchandise or discounts for employees based upon what programs they participate in or what healthy practices they adopt.

Some question why the city is using an out-of-town company offering rewards to retailers and resorts around the country and not trying to do more to promote Chattanooga merchants.

Amy Walker Cherry, a former economic development director for the city who now heads an incentive purchasing company known as Buy It Local LLC, said the use of ChipRewards "redirects purchasing power out of the area and leaves local businesses disproportionately out of the economic loop."

"While it is commendable for the city to engage in activities to improve health habits of city employees, it is a great concern that local taxpayer dollars are used to purchase national consumer incentives for a local, city program-especially during this economy," she said.

But Ms. Kelly dismisses such complaints.

"Before we ever decided to go with the ChipRewards program, we spent a couple of years knocking on doors of local businesses," Ms. Kelly said.

winning honors, saving lives

In June, Chattanooga's Well Advantage program was recognized with the 2009 Tennessee Municipal League Achievement Award for Excellence in Human Resource Programs.

The wellness program was a life-saver for Danny Mattheiss, a former Public Works equipment operator who retired in October.

A week after retiring, Mr. Mattheiss said his wife convinced him to take advantage of the city's free CareHere clinic to get a physical exam. A stress test ordered by clinic physician Dr. Glenn Beasley showed Mr. Mattheiss needed a quadruple-bypass heart surgery, which was conducted on Oct. 8.

"If it wouldn't have been for Dr. Beasley ... I probably would have had a bad heart attack and wouldn't be here today," he said.

Chattanooga's Well Advantage

- * City-operated pharmacy to fill most employee drug prescriptions
- * Two CareHere clinics offering free medical check-ups, blood tests and physician consultations
- * Wellness programs to help city employees with smoking cessation, weight loss, healthy diets, stress control, disease management
- * Fitness and exercise centers downtown and at Warner Park with exercise equipment and classes
- * ChipRewards discounts and prizes offered to employees based upon their healthy habits

Source: City of Chattanooga Personnel Department