Employee Wellness: A Necessary Component of Sustainability

What does wellness have to do with sustainability? Many people interested in living a healthy lifestyle are also concerned about the health of the environment. But for an institution like ORNL to sustain itself, it must be concerned with the health of its employees. ORNL’s principal products, ideas and information, depend on having healthy and productive employees.

Wellness programs are believed to enhance recruitment and retention of healthy employees and to improve productivity and employee engagement. Healthy employees also provide financial savings with reduced health care costs, decreased rates of illness and injuries, and reduced absenteeism. About 80% of illnesses are preventable, potentially saving 90% of all healthcare costs.

ORNL’s wellness program, which began in 2004, was included as one of the focus areas or “roadmaps” in the Sustainable Campus Initiative. The program’s goals are to (1) educate employees about ways to stay healthy, (2) prevent diseases and illness through early detection of health problems, and (3) lower healthcare costs for ORNL and its employees. Joan Lawson, Wellness Program Manager, is in the Safety Services Division, while Kathryn Cogar, Human Resources Directorate, coordinates the integration with the benefits program and handles wellness program communications. The program staff includes Donna Pierce, a registered dietitian, and Kathryn Pittman, an exercise physiologist.

A major component of the Wellness Program is its partnership with the Mayo Clinic, which provides information and tools for employees on the Mayo Clinic EmbodyHealth web portal. By completing the Mayo Clinic Health Assessment and earning points through the rewards program each year, employees can earn a $30 per month discount on their health insurance. Each year ORNL receives aggregate data on its employees. Lawson and Cogar use this information to select topics and activities for future program offerings.

The 2010 Mayo Clinic report arrived just before Christmas. The Wellness Program will release an annual report once the staff has evaluated the results. In previous years, Lawson says, the trends have been in the right direction. The most frequent risk factors for ORNL employees are being heavier than the desired weight and high blood pressure. Both factors are proving particularly challenging to correct. Most employees also need to improve their food choices and increase their exercise.

Lawson admits that results come slowly. “It takes a lot for individuals to change their unhealthy behaviors to healthy ones. Once someone starts practicing healthy behaviors, it takes a while to lose weight. With
Weight loss, the risk of developing high blood pressure, diabetes, sleep problems, and heart disease begins to fall. The risk factors are moving in the right direction—employees have fewer risk factors because they are practicing healthy behaviors.”

Weight management programs have attracted many participants. Annual ORNL presentations of the Mayo 10-week “My Weight Solution” programs began in 2009. Weigh-ins for the annual Santaclaustraphobia Challenge (fear of looking like Santa Claus after the holidays) are concluding. Participation has grown from 150 employees the first year to 875 this year, all trying not to gain more than 2 pounds between mid-November and the next January. Lawson says she’s looking forward to folding lots of t-shirts featuring the “exercising Santa” for the successful participants this year. Participants in the program have actually lost 2400 pounds over past holidays. A similar Beach Physique Challenge last spring drew 408 employees, with 70% avoiding gaining any weight during the challenge. These weight management activities have already been scheduled for 2011 (see box).

The Wellness Program sponsors seminars each month on health topics and arranges health screenings. These screenings have detected hidden health problems and allowed some employees a chance to get treatment before a life-threatening condition developed. To encourage exercise, the “Bike It Green” program stations bicycles around the campus for employees to use after they complete a short bike safety course. Additional activities, such as walking groups, hikes, bike rides, and 5K runs, encourage workers to exercise together.

**Past wellness events (clockwise from upper left) include carotid artery screening, hike on reservation, campus bike ride, 5K run, and blood glucose testing.**

**Weight Management Programs and Challenges for 2011 (Watch ORNL Today for more information.)**

- Weight Solutions Program
  January 24–March 30 (4500N, NTRC, 1060 Commerce Park)
- Weight Maintenance Program (for previous Weight Solutions Participants) January 24–March 30 (4500N)
- Beach Physique Challenge (initial weigh-in April 4–15, final weigh-in May 31–June 10)
- Santaclaustraphobia Challenge (initial weigh-in November 7–18, final weigh-in January 2–13)
Employees can take advantage of fitness centers, located in 4500S and at the Spallation Neutron Source, which are always open (except for maintenance breaks). Kathryn Pittman, an exercise physiologist, can help them develop a personalized exercise program. Donna Pierce, a registered dietitian, is also available for personal counseling and consultation. She will work with individuals to develop eating plans to reduce cholesterol, restrict salt, control blood sugar, or just for weight loss. Consultations with both Pittman and Pierce can be arranged by visiting Health Services and asking for a referral.

What’s new for 2011? The Mayo Clinic has added new tools for users to its EmbodyHealth web portal. The “Add New” feature allows the participant to update the information in their health assessment in the areas of nutrition, exercise, weight, and emotional health. These changes may cause the health indicator bar to move and generate different recommendations.

The 2011 seminar series kicks off January 18, with a motivational visit from local physician and television personality, “Dr. Bob” Overholt. His presentation is entitled, “The Best Year Yet—Only a Blink of an Eye Away.” In February for Heart Month speakers and screening will focus on heart health. In March, Food City dietitian, Jessica Gourley, will explain the “NuVal” nutritional value scale recently adopted by those stores, and University of Tennessee professor Lane Morris will provide information on work-life balance.

New activities are also planned. Weekly Tai Chi classes will be offered on Tuesdays, beginning January 11, led by Robert Varner of the ORNL Physics Division. Kathryn Pittman will continue the chair exercise session on Thursdays. In April, the Wellness Program will implement the “Walk to Wellness” campaign to help interested employees add more walking to their lifestyle and get their families involved. Watch for registration information in March. The May HealthFest will again offer the chance to try out new activities, as well as some of the staff favorites.

Both Lawson and Cogar appreciate the management support that the Wellness Program receives. ORNL Director Thom Mason made a video to encourage employees to complete the Health Assessment and led one of the sponsored walks. Herb Debban, Director of Facilities and Operation, led the HealthFest bike ride through the campus, and Director of Human Resources Deborah Stairs captained the HealthFest 5K run. The 2010 UT-Battelle “Esprit de Corps” award went to the ORNL Wellness Program because it touched so many employees.
Lawson looks forward to the transition from a wellness program to a wellness culture, where healthy behaviors are a habit. “Seeing a smile on the face of someone who has lost a lot of weight makes the work and effort worthwhile. It is extremely rewarding when someone who had trouble walking around the block develops healthy habits and behaviors and eventually ends up participating in a marathon.”

And she likes her work. "I hope to make a difference in employees' lives by getting them healthier so they can experience a higher quality of life."