

SETTING A STATEWIDE EXAMPLE

Successes Emerge From Government Wellness Initiative

By Charlee Beasor

Shelley Reeves credits Indiana state government's wellness program with saving her life. A claim like that might sound dramatic; that is until you hear her story.

In her role as executive assistant and constituent services representative in the Department of Natural Resources, she sits most of the day. When state government rolled out its health and wellness program in January 2014 and offered lower health insurance premiums as an incentive for participating, Reeves was on board.

"We literally sit. We don't have a Fitbit on our wrists; most people don't get up and go. This was a reason to do so," she recalls. "I started walking with the walking group. And I noticed a shortness of breath."

Reeves had been a smoker for 35 years, but quit eight years ago and notes that she wasn't overweight and ate a fairly healthy diet.

"I just needed to get moving," she says. "But I noticed a shortness of breath and my legs were always heavy to go up and down stairs. I would just slow my pace down and it would get better. It was really cold that year, and it was so cold I thought the pain I was having in my jaw was because of that."

She ended up vacationing in Florida and noticed the pain in her jaw didn't go away. She knew something was wrong, and she was afraid all those years of smoking had given her lung cancer. Back pain, shoulder pain and a pinching sensation in her arm told her doctor the problem was in her heart.

"They did an EKG, I had a heart scan done, and they said the cardiologist will read this. On Monday, I came to work and put my tennis shoes on to go down with the walking group. The phone rings at 11:45 a.m. and it was my doctor's office telling me not to do anything and to go home right now, 'You've got a minimum 85% blockage in your right artery.' They had made me an appointment for 8 o'clock in the morning with the cardiologist. They said, 'You need to go home and do nothing.'"



Shelley Reeves (left) discovered she had heart disease after noticing troubling health symptoms while participating in a walking group as part of the Indiana state government wellness program.

The surgeon who placed a stent in Reeves' right artery informed her after the surgery the blockage was actually 99%.

"If I had not gotten up and started walking with that wellness group, we don't know where I would have been," she attests. "It's a life-changing event. I tell people all the time, all of my co-workers, family and friends: You know your body; when there's something different, don't wait."

Telling her story is emotional for Reeves. As a "wellness champion" (just one prong of the state employee program), Reeves is paying her experience forward for other state employees. There are about 130 wellness champions statewide.

"We have about 10 wellness champions throughout the state for DNR, which is not a lot when you consider we have a thousand employees. But those (wellness champions) are the ones out there communicating with other employees. This program has encouraged a lot of our property employees to get out at lunch time. Each day, they get out and go. They'll walk the trails for a half hour at lunch and it's made a world of difference. This has really gotten people up and moving," she asserts.

Reeves aims to achieve at least 10,000 steps a day.

"I'm always looking down at my pedometer. That's because of the program. I never thought about it before they introduced this program to us," she adds.

'An integrated approach'

The state of Indiana is not the first government entity to put a wellness program in place, notes Denny Darrow, director of state personnel for the Indiana State Personnel Department, which administers the program. But he asserts there are “only a handful of states that are providing a well-rounded, integrated wellness strategy to our employees.”

While 2014 was the first full year of the “Invest In Your Health” wellness program with an incentive-based point system through Humana Vitality, the move toward consumer-driven health care began in 2006 under then-Gov. Mitch Daniels. Employees were encouraged to make smart choices when it came to choosing services and providers and make responsible health care decisions that could result in lower insurance premiums.

Then, under Gov. Mike Pence, in 2012, the state did a survey of its 28,000 employees to understand what they wanted from a wellness program. And 10,000 employees responded, with better nutrition and exercise as the top priorities.

The state introduced the Statehouse Market in 2012, which offers local produce and healthy lunch options. A registered dietician and nutritionist is available to any employee free of charge. The on-site health and wellness center, staffed by IU health physicians and nurses, opened in June 2014.

Walking groups are offered with options for beginners, intermediate and advanced walking speeds and employees are eligible for fitness center discounts around the state. Yoga classes are held at White River State Park and on campus, as well as Zumba dance classes.

Another portion of the wellness program targets financial well-being and offers health savings accounts, discounts and access to Castlight, which allows users to compare prices on health services and providers.

Though the program is only in its second year, over half of employees are already engaged by completing at least one of the three steps in the program (undergoing a health risk assessment, having a check with a physician or at one of the state-sponsored screenings, and concluding customized action items).

Darrow relays that state employees, by utilizing the financial

services available with the program, have saved over one million dollars on services such as lab tests and MRIs so far.

Cameron Troxell, wellness director for the state government, notes that it can be challenging to run the program due to the sheer number of employees. Add in that they are spread throughout 92 counties and have a wide variety of jobs.

“Communication was critical and we took a very, very broad spectrum approach. We use a very good and recognizable brand with Invest In Your Health, and we’ve had a great brand recognition. We continue to share success stories we get from employees. That’s a really good way to engage folks, to share stuff from their peers,” Troxell explains.

“Last year we had over 65 biometric screening events. This year we will carry that forward. Walking events, some of which the Governor has participated in, are visible examples of how we can set the tone from a cultural perspective.”

All on board

That cultural perspective is critical. Gov. Pence and agency directors have embraced and promoted the health and wellness message from the very beginning, says Darrow, noting Pence’s Roadmap for Indiana had a plank committing to the well-being of Hoosier families.

“We are enabling his vision. We want to create a healthier, more vibrant Indiana in the long term. Not only as an example, but a call to action to Indiana employers. You can make small investments. It doesn’t have to be a large investment. Holding exercise classes on campus can make the most meaningful difference in a big way,” Darrow asserts.

The ultimate goal is addressing some of the root health problems plaguing Hoosiers. Darrow points to the recent Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, which measures well-being among states. Indiana dropped from 41st in 2013 to 48th in 2014.

The Governor, via email, acknowledges that Indiana has some uphill challenges to face in regard to health and wellness.

“We know that Indiana has much room for improvement when it comes to the overall health of our citizens. It is important to me to see Hoosiers’ health improve so that they can enjoy long, quality lives with

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State employees take part in a yoga class on the banks of the White River during Employee Health and Wellness Month.



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their families,” Pence offers.

He describes how the state of Indiana is working with several organizations to provide the Invest In Your Health program to employees and to create a broader reach.

“The Invest In Your Health program is widely supported and complemented by various state programs and organizations. The Wellness Council of Indiana, the Indiana State Department of Health, the Indiana Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the Employers’ Forum have been great sources of information and encouragement. Programs like InShape Indiana and 1-800-QuitNow serve to support our employees on their health journey,” he adds.

Every step counts

You don’t have to look far to see how the program is impacting state employees.

“We have begun to see that culture shift. We are seeing the dynamic every day, employees just walking around the state government campus and engaging with co-workers. Those are small steps which create meaningful long-term changes,” Darrow highlights.

Debbie Watts is another success story. Before she began walking with the wellness program, she couldn’t walk from her car to her desk without getting winded.

“I thought, ‘I’m going to do this. Okay.’



Vendors, such as Pattie and Dave Barrickman of Wildflower Ridge Honey, sell their goods at the Statehouse Market, which is open Thursdays from late May to early October. The market was created in response to employees’ desire for better nutrition.

I started and when I first started, I couldn’t even do a thousand steps, not even 500. Now I can do 10,000 before I even get to work in the morning,” she exclaims.

She goes to the gym and has changed her eating habits. She’s lost 69 pounds (as of this writing) and isn’t stopping.

“I walk all over this place. A lot of times I try to take the longest route. I park away from the door now. I walk along the building, anything to get more steps. I’m drinking my

water, and I’m just not going to give up. I have a lot more to go,” she offers.

Another critical piece of Watts’ wellness journey has been working with the registered dietician and on-site physician since day one. “We’re all in this together,” she offers.

When she walks around the government center, people tell her what a great job she’s doing. She encourages them to join in.

“If I can do it, anybody can do it,” she concludes.

RESOURCES: Denny Darrow, Indiana State Personnel Department, at www.in.gov/spd | Gov. Mike Pence and Cameron Troxell, Indiana state government, at www.in.gov