

# RESERVOIR OF RESOURCES

## New WCI Offerings to Keep Businesses, Workers Healthy

By Anthony Schoettle

The pandemic was bad news on many fronts, but there were some silver linings.

One of the bright spots is the increased awareness of various mental and physical health issues, and companies' willingness – even eagerness – to address those issues, be accommodating when the situation calls for it and encourage overall well-being among their employees.

The Wellness Council of Indiana (WCI), which was founded in 1988 and acquired by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce in 2010, has been and continues to be on the forefront of many of these initiatives.

The WCI is still breaking ground with a bevy of new programs and offerings for businesses and their employees statewide.

"You can't expect your employees to be present and do a great job if any part of their overall well-being is not in good order," believes Candace Shaffer, associate vice president, benefits and payroll within Purdue University's human resources department. "Purdue has a lot of resources and research at its disposal, but the Wellness Council of Indiana brings in experts and other employers in a way that helps us learn about best practices and share what we've learned ourselves. The WCI's programs make all who participate in them that much stronger."

### Latest programs, initiatives

Among the WCI's new focuses is obesity.

A study released this fall by the Trust for America's Health, a non-profit, non-partisan public health policy, research and advocacy organization, concludes Indiana is the seventh most obese state in the country.

Many Indiana businesses and organizations are trying to figure out what programs to

offer and what medications their insurance should cover, explains WCI Executive Director Jennifer Pferrer.

In the spring, WCI will begin partnering with the Indiana Department of Health to launch an Ending Weight Bias initiative. The program not only looks at helping Hoosiers improve their physical health but addresses how employers can address weight bias in the workplace. "We'll be looking at a lot of different issues and bringing best practices into play," Pferrer says.

Another new WCI effort centers on substance misuse. The programs are designed to assist employees as they come back into the workplace. "Not only that, but it's also about ensuring employees can navigate their own recovery and ask employers for help when needed," Pferrer notes.

### Anti-tobacco, vaping campaign

Tobacco usage among Hoosiers has long been a big concern and more recently vaping/e-cigarettes has seen a rapid rise in popularity.

WCI has long been a proponent of

increasing the cigarette tax to reduce the state's smoking rate, and Pferrer said her organization will continue to beat that drum. She points out that Indiana still has one of the lowest cigarette taxes nationwide.

"We're launching a series of town hall meetings – in conjunction with the Indy Chamber – to talk about the tobacco tax," she relates. "And there is a messaging campaign we'll be launching this fall that addresses tobacco use in Indiana."

Pferrer reports there's new emphasis on "how to include vaping" into WCI's messaging and initiatives to curb smoking among Hoosiers.

"We have to get into a prevention mindset to get youths never to get started on tobacco and vaping products in the first place," she emphasizes.

### Accommodating mothers

Another new WCI program involves maternal (and paternal) issues.

"We're focusing on several important aspects of this issue," explains Ashley



The Wellness Council of Indiana draws thousands of employers and employees for various workshops and training events it holds throughout the year.

O'Rourke, WCI's director of community and employer engagement. "It's clear, the overall health of the mother impacts the health of the child, and we're addressing that."

Additionally, O'Rourke states, there's an issue of losing talented employees in the workforce because mothers aren't accommodated in the workplace and are at times either opting not to or being forced out of work. "Lactation issues and other accommodations have become an important focus," she imparts.

The Pregnant Workers Fairness Act was put into play in June; it expanded federal protections for individuals during pregnancy and experiencing conditions of pregnancy and childbirth.

With that, there are certainly new issues and regulations for employers to understand, O'Rourke stresses. "We want Hoosier businesses to be aware of best practices, which often exceed merely meeting regulations."

Additionally, WCI is rolling out programs, training, consultations and other resources, including an employer lactation toolkit, to help them understand federal regulations, deal with other aspects of this issue and retain talent that might otherwise be lost, O'Rourke remarks.

### Customized programs offered

The WCI's programs and initiatives have evolved "so much since 2019," O'Rourke says. Chief among those changes is more one-on-one interactions with Hoosier businesses.

"Access to the employer's voice really steers our mission," she

begins. "There is not a one-size-fits-all program or initiative. This is a one size fits one. We understand that people in different age ranges have different needs and people and businesses in different regions, whether rural or urban, have different needs. As we roll out our training and offerings, we've been very intentional in each region and county."

Not only does WCI tailor its programs based on the unique needs of communities, businesses and employees, it also helps the organization plug those in need to "local and regional community resources," Pferrer adds.

While the health and wellness of employees has long been on WCI officials' minds, a broader range of Hoosiers are now becoming aware of the importance of these issues, Pferrer says. She points out that statewide efforts like Health First Indiana – which established a public health infrastructure for delivery of services in every county – are helping push wellness causes and programs forward.

Purdue's Shaffer says WCI's offerings have "very real, tangible impacts on businesses and organizations across the state."

"These initiatives are first and foremost about your employees' health and well-being," she imparts. "But there's also a measurable return on investment to being involved in these health and well-being programs. It helps with an organization's healthcare spending, absenteeism, productivity and employee recruitment and retention. Taking care of your employees' mental and physical health is the right thing to do for a whole lot of reasons."

**RESOURCES:** Ashley O'Rourke and Jennifer Pferrer, Wellness Council of Indiana, at [www.wellnessindiana.org](http://www.wellnessindiana.org) | Candace Shaffer, Purdue University, [www.purdue.edu](http://www.purdue.edu)



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