

We're All In This TOGETHER

BY **Steven G. Aldana** PhD

IF YOU TOOK A WALK AROUND DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH AROUND NOONTIME, YOU WOULD SEE DOZENS OF PEOPLE CARRYING SKY BLUE GYM BAGS. They are all employees of Highmark Blue Shield and Blue Cross of Pennsylvania. Highmark is a health insurance company that serves much of Pennsylvania. These employees are walking to or from an onsite fitness center owned and managed by Highmark. Employees can access the gym at all hours of the day and they even get time to exercise on the company dime. This has become part of the Highmark worksite culture. Highmark leadership feels that helping employees stay active is good for business. When I visited with Highmark CEO Ken Melani, I asked him how they could justify both the cost of this facility and the work time lost. Ken's comment was profound. He said "For the past four years our health care cost trend has been flat." Then he proceeded to show me their actual health care cost data. The trend was indeed flat.

The skeptical scientist in me immediately began looking for all the other things the company was doing that might impact costs. Two cost control strategies stuck out immediately. Highmark has aggressively controlled pharmaceutical costs by highlighting generic drugs, and they have used co-pays and deductibles to make sure their employees have some financial skin in using care and incurring cost. But most other companies use these same cost control strategies. All things considered, I believe that the primary factor in their incredible cost containment outcomes was the culture of health that permeated their the company. Every employee is routinely invited and incentivised to participate in an array of great wellness programs. Most employees do participate. In any given month, 35% to 50% of all eligible employees use of the fitness center. A year after my visit to Highmark, they published an independent analysis of the ROI of their program and found that for every dollar spent on employee wellness they saved \$1.65.¹

What I found most impressive was the fact Highmark is aggressively helping customers adopt wellness strategies within their own companies. This is a huge leap forward from the norm just a few years ago. Many wellness vendors, insurance companies, benefits consultants, and health care providers are quick to promote the values and benefits of wellness programs, but they are slow to implement good wellness efforts within their own



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companies with their own employees. They have often failed to walk the wellness talk. They have been content to sprinkle wellness pixie dust on others, but they have been stingy with the dust inside their own four walls... an irony that is unfortunately more common than not.

Highmark not only believes in the importance of healthy living, but they have put their business investment, strategy, culture, and leadership where their mouth is. Hats off to Highmark.

The great news is that Highmark is not alone. The Dallas/Ft Worth International Airport, the City of Sitka Alaska, Pepsi, Secura Insurance, the Berkshire Health Systems, the Davis School District, the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce, and many, many others are serious about employee wellness. And they are all changing the world, one worksite and one employee at a time. There are certainly other worksites that are equally engaged, and that are also making a difference but on the whole, worksites can do more.

As I have had the privilege of helping the worksites mentioned above, I am encouraged when I meet the people who make wellness happen. Almost without exception the wellness

professionals I interact with are the happiest, healthiest, and best looking employees on site and they are a pleasure to work with. They are not stuffy, stressed, or grumpy, just enthusiastic, energetic people who walk and lead the wellness talk. I tip my hat to them because they share my passion and desire to make the world a better place.

Dr. Troy Adams and I have spent a lot of time, effort and research trying to figure out how to help you in your wellness efforts. We are on this journey together, learning from each other and trying to be as helpful and effective as possible. We invite you to use the WellSteps tools we have developed: The Personal Health Assessment, the Checklist to Change, the Plan to Change Worksheet and the ROI Calculator. We hope they will be of value to you. See how WellSteps might help you more significantly impact the lives of your employees and their families.

Worksite wellness is here to stay. The need to have healthy employees will increase in the years to come. We have reached the point where worksite wellness efforts have become a vital business strategy that cannot be ignored. Help employees adopt and

maintain healthy behaviors and you will be joining us in our mission to help change the world. ★

REFERENCES:

1. Naydeck BL, Pearson JA, Ozminkowski RJ, Day BT, Goetzel RZ. The Impact of the Highmark Employee Wellness Programs on 4-Year Healthcare Costs. *J Occup Environ Med.* 2008 Feb;50(2):146-156.



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Dr. Steven G. Aldana is a former professor of Lifestyle Medicine in the Department of Exercise Sciences at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and he is an adjunct faculty member of the University of Illinois School of Medicine. Currently, Dr. Aldana is the CEO of WellSteps.com. He has spent his career researching and teaching about the impact of lifestyle on disease and quality of life.

Dr. Aldana has published over 60 research articles and has written five books on the connections between healthy living and disease prevention. He is a regular consultant to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and the California Department of Health Services. In the past few years he has given over 80 invited lectures and keynote speeches around the United States. He has received numerous state, private, and federal grants to research how the adoption of healthy behaviors can prevent, arrest, and even reverse many common chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer.



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