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WORKPLACES WITH HEART : American Heart Association recognizes fit-friendly companies

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Mike Hammer got into shape thanks to his job.

"I had never been to a gym in my life until I came to Citrix," said Mr. Hammer, the Santa Barbara company's workplace services director, who was hired in 2008. "I had a high blood pressure problem. I was winded walking across the parking lot."

One day, a co-worker invited Mr. Hammer, then in his late 50s, to join him for a lunchtime workout at the company's 6,000-square-foot fitness center full of elliptical machines, stationary bicycles and treadmills.

"It was a life changer for me," Mr. Hammer said, noting he has gained muscle and is eating healthier. "Now I work out on P90X (a home exercise program) every day and keep up with the young bucks at age 61."

That's one example of how South Coast businesses and nonprofits are encouraging their workers to stay in shape through exercise, nutritional meals and snacks, screenings and education on topics ranging from healthy lifestyles to quitting smoking. Their efforts have led them to receive gold- or platinum-level recognition from the American Heart Association as Fit-friendly Worksites. (Citrix's level is platinum.)

It's part of the association's goal to improve Americans' heart health by 20 percent by 2020, said Lisa Dosch, executive director of the Santa Barbara-based Greater Central Coast chapter. That's measured by getting people to stop smoking, start exercising, eat right and maintain proper levels for cholesterol, weight, blood sugar and blood pressure.

"One of the areas of influence is where Americans spend most of their days, which is their work," Ms. Dosch, 32, said.

Employers told the News-Press that they emphasize wellness programs for the sake of

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Laura Turner and Morgan Pinney work out in the fitness center at Citrix, which has earned platinum recognition from the American Heart Association for promoting a fit-friendly workplace
STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Registered nurse Svetlana Hamilton does a biometric screening with Kaina Gomard, a respiratory care practitioner at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. The hospital checks cholesterol and other vitals annually and has earned platinum recognition from the Heart Association

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their workers — and as a sound business practice. Healthy employees call in sick less often, are less likely to get injured and focus better on their job.

Wellness programs can save thousands of dollars per employee, said Jason Stone of UCSB's Department of Exercise & Sports Studies and Recreation, which earned platinum-level recognition from the Heart Association. He coordinates the UC WorkStrong program for faculty and staff who have made workers' compensation claims and said it has reduced the number of second claims.

"A second claim for an injury would be \$20,600 (on average), but the average cost (per person) to provide the program is \$3,000. They're not having that second injury," Mr. Stone, 33, said.

The WorkStrong program and the Gaucho Pulse program for all staff, faculty and students covers nutrition, ergonomics and exercise strategies through free workshops, lunchtime seminars and classes, Mr. Stone said. "We have a registered dietitian who offers one-on-one consultations, and we do biometric testing for body fat, cholesterol, BMI (body mass index) and blood pressure."

The wellness programs have made a difference, he said. "We definitely see a huge boost in morale."

At The Towbes Group, another gold-level workplace, people have called in sick less often because of the wellness programs, said Jennifer Carmona, 33, an assistant commercial property manager at the real estate company. "They're sleeping better and are more alert at work. Little changes can make big changes at the end of the day."

Since November, employees collectively have lost 500 pounds at CenCal Health, a gold-level workplace where a trainer teaches free circuit training classes in the company's gym, said Karyn Fish, director of human resources and administrative services.

"I'm proud to say that as of our June 19 board meeting, we had walked over 89 million steps (as recorded by employees' pedometers)," Ms. Fish, 54, said. "It's pretty cool."

CenCal Health, The Towbes Group and others give prizes such as iPods or paid days off to motivate workers to exercise and eat right. Cottage Health System, a platinum-level workplace, pays employees \$250 for enrolling in the Choices for Health Medical Plan, \$200 for participating in biometric screenings and health assessments and another \$100 for wellness activities such as getting a mammogram or colonoscopy or completing a quit-smoking program.

Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital offers its workers a gym, pool and classes in yoga and healthy lifestyles. The cafeteria has eliminated all fried foods and provides low-calorie, nutritious meals, and the hospital has a weekly farmers market.

Employees with asthma, high blood pressure or other chronic conditions get free consultations with registered nurses, said Ron Lafrican, Cottage Health System benefits director.

Mr. Lafrican, 47, noted the wellness program has inspired workers. "One of the things we do for our employees is an ice cream social. The last couple of years, employees have stopped asking for ice cream. Now many are saying, 'Do you have low-fat yogurt? Where's the fruit?'"

Ask Ernesto Paredes about the benefits of healthy eating. The executive director of Easy Lift Transportation stopped treating his employees to pizza and got rid of soda machines. Now he brings free bananas, apples, oranges and seasonal fruits to the office.

"We recognized that we as an office could be healthier." Mr. Paredes said.

Mr. Paredes allows workers to take a 30-minute break every day to walk, and Easy Lift covers gym memberships. He said he has seen his workers lose weight and embrace a healthier, less stressful lifestyle.

"We want you to love what you do at Easy Lift, but we want the best part of your day to be when you leave, go back to your family and go walking on the beach."

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From left, Virginia Andrade, David Simpson and Manuel Andrade enjoy the free fruit at Easy Lift Transportation. The Santa Barbara nonprofit received gold recognition from the Heart Association

FYI

The American Heart Association offers workplaces tools to promote a heart-healthy