

To keep bottom lines fit, businesses help workers stay healthy

By [Michael Flynn](#), STAFF WRITER
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photo: [Steve Dixon](#)

| Ernest Grant, right gets a yoga workout with other participants during the employee Health Fair at Harrah's Casino in Cherokee.

ASHEVILLE - After inspecting rows of tables at the Grove Park Inn's inaugural health fair, employee Celeste Lynn decided, "I am going to do it all."

Lynn, the supervisor of the Melting Pot, the inn's employee cafeteria, said she planned to get her eyes, blood pressure and other health indicators checked, as well as collect a pile of information.

"This is wonderful," she said. "Sometimes people don't know what's bad for them. If you know what not to do, that really helps."

The inn's health fair was part of a resort-wide wellness initiative begun in 2004, said spokesman Phil Werz. "It's merely the kick-off to the start of a healthier Grove Park

Inn."

Seeking to promote healthier, more effective employees and combat ever-increasing health-care costs, companies across Western North Carolina and the nation are creating wellness programs for their employees, according to David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America.

"For the first time, employers are realizing that the difference between profit and loss is health care," Hunnicutt said. And given the amount of hours Americans spend at their jobs, he said, "the workplace is where they'll experience the consequences or rewards of good or bad health."

"The message is out in Asheville"

Grove Park Inn benefits and health services manager Dee Queen said the fair's goal was "educating employees on how to take care of themselves." The company wants workers to establish themselves with primary care physicians, she said, to avoid more expensive emergency room care.

Across the mountains, Harrah's Cherokee Casino opened its health fair this year to include families and dependents for the first time.

"It's amazing what they were able to provide for my family," said manager trainee Casey Runner, 27, who mentioned checks of blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol and comprehensive health profiles.

"The casino's wellness effort is trying to reach out to the community more," she said. "A lot of that stems from diabetes and other health problems on the reservation."

Compensation and benefits manager Tootsie Gloyne said the casino also offers diet and exercise classes, as well as intra-company softball, basketball and volleyball contests that are organized with the casino's employee relations committee⁴.

"And we have so much more to implement," Gloyne said.

The Grove Park Inn's employee wellness plan includes smoking cessation classes⁵ and availability of the resort's sports complex to all of the company's more than 1,000 employees at designated times. Employees who sign up for the 10-week aerobics class pay a \$50 fee, Werz said, but as an incentive to get fit are reimbursed if they attend each class.

The Wellness Councils' Hunnicutt said the popularity of wellness programs at Asheville area employers was notable for a city of its comparatively small size.

"The message is out in Asheville," Hunnicutt said, which he attributed in part to what he saw as the area's focus on hospitality, community and quality of life.

Hunnicutt was in Asheville in May to present a well workplace award to The Biltmore Co., one of about 12 area employers that have been among the Wellness Councils' 3,000 nationwide members to receive such a designation since the 1998 creation of a local affiliate.

Wes Mattes, a guest relations employee at the Biltmore Estate, said workplace wellness programs at his company and elsewhere are successful because of the built-in group support they provide.

"Getting yourself to do it in groups means you are more likely to do it," he said.

Mattes, who is a member of The Biltmore Co.'s wellness committee, said he is part of a pilot program coordinated by the company and Mission Hospitals that involves individual physician assessments and counseling sessions with a registered dietitian.

"The idea is to prevent future problems by working with your weight and to get you eating healthy," said Mattes, who noted participants are not charged to enroll. If successful, the program will be made available to the company's entire workforce, he said.

"Out of Control Costs"

According to a Towers Perrin survey, large employers will on average see a 12 percent increase in health care costs in 2004, the fifth straight year of double-digit increases. As a result, employers are paying twice as much for health care in 2004 as they were in 1998.

Ann Ashley, human resources executive with The Biltmore Co., said the company's wellness initiatives have helped keep increases in the single digits and trim health-care costs by \$3 million in the last 2-1/2 years. The percentage paid by employees has increase only 1/2 percent in the last three years, she said.

Still, a survey of WNC businesses completed for Mission Hospitals in March determined that 95 percent of companies that offer health insurance do not participate in disease management programs. And among small business, only 12 percent report participating in wellness programs.

Hunnicutt acknowledged that such numbers presented a challenge to groups such as the Wellness Councils, but the combination of "out-of-control" health care costs and an aging workforce are sure to spread the attractiveness of wellness programs.

"It's a concept that virtually every business everywhere is going to get the message on," he said.

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CULLOWHEE - After helping to launch a wellness plan for state employees in the Fayetteville area, state health plan representatives traveled to Cullowhee last week to discuss implementing similar programs in Western North Carolina.

"I want to go beyond health fairs," health plan administrator Jack Walker told the health care officials and leaders of state educator and employee groups who gathered at Western Carolina University. "It's one moment in your life; we want to re-wire brains."

The long-term viability of the state's health plan, which covers about 550,000 state employees, dependents and retirees, rests on developing a healthier workforce, he said.

Walker discussed a 12-week pilot program where five groups totaling 158 Cumberland County workers exercised three nights a week after work at a local fitness center and participated in one weekly education class on diet and nutrition at no cost to participants for those who completed the program.

"What we've learned so far is individuals are ready to make a change," he said, "but they didn't know how to go about it." Group support was a key to the program's success, Walker noted, as well as sessions that met immediately after work and before participants returned home.

Walker and colleague Lisa Bultman said that fitter members saved the health plan \$255,000 in long-term costs. The annual cost of care for a healthy employee averages about \$800 a year, Walker said, but for individuals with chronic diseases such as diabetes the total is about \$7,000.

And with a workforce that has been declining in health, "we're losing \$800 people and replacing them with \$7,000 people," Walker said. "It would mean the end of the health plan if we didn't encourage a wellness attitude."