

Take Good Care

Mankato Clinic uses public health tools to encourage healthy habits among caregiving employees.

Recommendations to eat healthily, be active and quit tobacco—the three-pronged approach advocated by the Statewide Health Improvement Program to cut chronic disease costs and suffering—suit Bonnie Frisk perfectly. A public health worker in Blue Earth County, Frisk says: “I’m passionate about our work on SHIP projects. Making healthy improvements really fits what’s best for our community.”

That attitude is helping business develop a culture of health. “We spend so much time at work,” Frisk says, “it just makes sense that we take care of ourselves at our worksites.” In Blue Earth County, worksites numbering from nearly 50 to a college campus with more than 16,000 people are taking advantage of SHIP grants and interventions to make healthy choices easy choices.

Healthier Workplaces, Healthier Workers, a Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota program, has been adopted by seven businesses, including the Mankato Clinic. Although clinic programs already encouraged healthy habits, since SHIP, the clinic now has a wellness committee with the following purpose statement: “The vision of Wellness for Life is to improve the overall well-being of our staff, which will also support the clinic’s mission to improve patient care.”

One of the particular challenges of the clinic, says Sara Will, human resources administrator, is that about 85 percent of their 710 staff are female. These are moms, grandmothers and caregivers who typically put the needs of others first. “Many of these women find it difficult to find time for themselves, yet they are interested in living healthier lives for themselves and for their families,” Will says. “Our wellness committee wants to provide our staff with tools and techniques to help them live that healthier life.”

With two young children, Will also faces the issue

of work-life balance. She rises early to walk and run. “That’s the only time I have to do it,” she says. She has a friend join her, which helps keep her accountable for her health. And at the clinic, management has a role in encouraging staff to take care of themselves. Frisk says, “They must recognize the importance of providing staff time to take a walk or to have stretching breaks during the day.”

Mankato Clinic’s efforts include wellness activities throughout the year punctuated by short-term shape-up challenges. This coming fall, Will says the clinic will take



advantage of internal resources such as dietitians and a psychologist to tackle weight-loss issues.

Improving the health of staff also may improve the clinic’s fiscal health. “Last year, our health plan was \$1 million over budget,” Will says. While this year’s budget is fine so far, she adds, the clinic needs to be proactive. Perhaps in the long run, it can bring down its health plan costs.

The wisdom of wellness, Frisk says, is in moderation. “We tell people not to deprive themselves of things they love,” she says. “If you go camping, have that roasted hot dog and a s’more.” But be mindful of what you are eating and moderate about how much. ●