

Kicking the Habit

Custom Alarm and Hy-Vee in the Rochester area offer employees the environment to get and stay tobacco free.

Transforming work places to become tobacco-free in Olmsted County calls for a big picture approach. New tobacco-free policies in place or in process are designed, says Michelle Haugen, “not to target the smoker but to target the environment.”

“We’re trying to create an environment where it’s easier for people to quit smoking,” says Haugen, a county public health educator. SHIP seeks to improve the health of Minnesotans through policy, systems and environmental changes to that lead to better nutrition, increased physical activity and decreased tobacco use.

After all, according to the American Cancer Society, just 20 minutes after quitting smoking, heart and blood pressure drop. As months and years of not smoking accumulate, a former smoker’s risk of heart disease, stroke and lung cancer decrease.

But quitting smoking is not easy, says Dawn Rainey, human resources manager for Custom Alarm. A couple of the smokers among the company’s 75 employees have committed to quit smoking but not yet succeeded. “They’re both still trying,” she adds. Custom Alarm has made its campus completely tobacco-free and forbids employees to smoke on work hours.

This transformation to a no-tobacco policy has been effective with the help of SHIP, Rainey says. She did not have to “start from scratch” but instead had SHIP’s guidance in introducing the new policy over six months, crafting it, and answering employees’ questions with FAQs and in meetings.

The goal of SHIP is to help Minnesotans live longer, healthier lives by preventing the leading causes of chronic disease: tobacco and obesity. SHIP launched as part of Minnesota’s Vision for a Better State of Health, the bipartisan health reform package enacted in 2008. It makes it easier for Minnesotans to choose healthier behaviors by making changes in the places where we live, learn, work and play.

Registered Dietitian, Kaitlin Anderson was already in place at the north Rochester store of the Hy-Vee

grocery chain. Even before she joined the Wellness Works Coalition in Olmsted County, she had been leading classes on wellness and nutrition at the store and in the community. With the help of a SHIP mini-grant, Anderson was trained in the American Lung Association’s Freedom from Smoking program.

She offered classes to Hy-Vee employees; six signed up and, after the eight-session course, have successfully quit smoking. Changes to the workplace environment make it easier for these new nonsmokers to continue their quest for a healthier lifestyle. They have eliminated the designated smoking area and established a tobacco-free campus policy that limits tobacco use to their personal cars.

So much of the work depends on the people in the worksites, says Haugen of Rainey, Anderson, and the other worksite coordinators: “props to our partners.”

“We provide resources, funding and technical assistance,” she says, “but it’s the people in the worksites who are making a difference for a healthy environment.” ●

